

Chapter Four

FATHER, FAMILIES AND THE FUTURE

FATHERHOOD IN AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

by
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The contemporary discussion on fatherhood is intimately linked with our perception of what it is to be a man, and to how boys are made into men. Current psychology identifies the importance of a father figure in moving a boy from dependence on his mother to identifying as a man in the world. Anthropology finds rites of passage for boys to manhood one of the most widespread cultural forms across the planet.

Here we find ourselves talking about fatherhood in the late 1990's, and it may be valuable to take some time to remember how fatherhood has been viewed in previous eras.

What we have expected of men and of fathers' changes with every generation and varies greatly between cultures. Here is a by no means definitive romp through some of the historical moods of the fathering role.

In the past centuries the model European father has been the stern patriarch, moral guide and disciplinarian, bending or breaking the child's will to the required norms. It was held that the father, not the mother provided the best example of proper moral character for girls as well as boys. Women were seen to be excessively fond of their children and governed by their passions rather than reason. A father was expected to be stern but not cruel, and to not punish in anger. The father controlled land ownership and could keep control through holding the title from the sons.

Indigenous cultures put no such responsibility or power on one man to be the sole role model for children, but allows a range of significant male figures to guide a child, especially a boy into adult life.

It is beyond the capacity of this brief talk to comment on in depth on Maori patterns of fathering, especially pre-European practice. It is clear though that both paternal and maternal lineage is important in whakapapa and therefore the knowledge of one's father is a vital link with this. But from the anecdotal inquiry I have done it seems clear that the raising of children was shared by a widely extended whanau providing an array of people fulfilling the pakeha definition of parental roles. Today this is still common practice, especially in rural areas.

This talk focuses on the dominant cultures expectation and conversation on the father role in New Zealand and because my work has been largely with men will focus more on the fathering of boys than on girls.

HISTORY OF FATHERING AND FAMILY

Over the time since European settling of New Zealand and Australia there are four key roles of fatherhood that have slipped or been lost. These are the irreplaceable caregiver, moral educator, head of the family and sole breadwinner (Blankenhorn, 1995).

Fatherhood is not some fixed role that has forever existed. Every generation and every culture interprets what is a father's role differently. And being a father is closely linked to our view of what it is to be a man. What we expect of men will point to what we expect of fathers. So the current discussion on fathers has a past and has a future. Let's look at what has been the father's job in the past. In doing so we need to remember there are alternative stories such as the role of the father in Maori society before and after European contact.

Lets imagine a symbolic person to represent the father over time. We will call him Fred. We will follow Fred's role over the last few hundred years.

In the centuries before the industrial revolution typically Fred's world was rural based and his work was carried out at home rather than in a separate workplace. Fred lived mainly in an extended family system with his wife, their parents and their children and their relatives. There were strong kinship ties throughout his family and he held the authority in the family.

But the Northwest areas of Europe where most New Zealand settlers came Fred's family structure was different than the rest of Europe's three generation households. Fred's society was made up largely of families living in the two generation form of mother, father and children and no relatives. In this way it was quite similar to the modern nuclear family.

But it was different in that it was based on economic necessity rather than emotional and romantic love. Their families also existed inside small close knit communities and were not very private from other families and many adults were involved in raising children. The whole village raised the children. In those days the main measure of Fred's manhood was to become a father.

Fred was a powerful figure as the head of his household and owner of his land (depending on his class), which he passed to his eldest son, or could withhold as he wished. His job as a man was to successfully head his household and guide the destiny of his children and he was hands on in this role. Fred it seems was an active parent in charge of the teaching and moral guidance of the children. Child raising books were addressed to him and not his wife. His sons worked alongside him on the land and in urban settings he taught his sons his trade or apprenticed them to other men to learn a

skill. He made all the decisions and directed their career and choice of marriage. If he sounds like the ultimate patriarch to you remember he was less powerful than he had been in previous eras because much of his traditional authority had passed to religious and civic institutions outside the family.

The Victorian era in the nineteenth century saw a softening of Fred's aloofness and discipline as a father as ideas of romantic love and emotional warmth began to become important in the family. Even in those days there was talk of a "New Father" and encouragement for Fred to be more tender with his children. It also saw the separation of home and work which was to be the seed of the contemporary crisis in fatherhood.

When Fred shifted to the colonies his family took on special significance as the upholder of civilised society in the face of the large male population of itinerant labour which wandered wherever work was, didn't own land and binged their earnings on drink. His family was still largely a place of home and work as it always had been with he and his wife working in close proximity to the house and large numbers of children working from an early age.

With the industrial revolution all this was to change throughout the world. Traditional rural and village lifestyles were disrupted and people moved into towns and cities. Fred's productive labour shifted from the home to the outside workplace and his fathering became a part time activity. For the first time in human history Fred couldn't be at home and at work at the same time. This change happened all through the nineteenth century but for New Zealand and Australia mainly in the last part of the century and was largely complete by the turn of the century apart for the family farm and the small business, both of which are still visible today.

This separation gave rise to what has been called "the modern nuclear family" consisting of Fred and his wife and children living apart from other relatives. This family also became increasingly private and isolated from other families. This Victorian middle class family was seen as a haven from the heartless industrial world and the ideal of the companionate marriage was in full swing where the emotional bonds between husband and wife and parents and children were valued. Fred was less punitive and authoritarian and running the family was becoming more of a cooperative partnership than the hierarchy of earlier times. This is a trend we see continuing right through till today.

So industrialisation moved Fred out to work and placed his wife as the reigning domestic power. His moral guide role moved over to her as she came to be seen as the person better suited to developing children's character. His role and authority as teacher moved to her also, and with compulsory education to professionals outside the home. There was a new philosophy of the "tender years" and women's special capacity to care for children which replaced Fred's "masculine reason" as the proper currency for parenting. Fathers authority was out and mothers heart was in!

Fred began this century with much less authority in the home than he had at the beginning of the previous one, it having shifted to the workplace with his productivity. His roles as moral educator, irreplaceable caregiver are gone and head of the family is becoming merely a formality. But at least he was the sole provider as breadwinning was well established as his main fathering job. While he was busy conforming to the industrial workplace, his wife was being subjected to the domestic sciences throughout this century, and till the revolutions of the seventies has had to live up to various and changing ideals of what it is to be a mother.

At the same time he has been evolving from the aloof authoritarian patriarch towards a more emotionally engaged and democratic New Father. Fred's main job at home came to be seen as a good husband who supports his wife to fill her natural place as hands on parent and he retreated from the direct care of children. As motherhood became increasingly a domestic science mothers turned to experts rather than her husband for advice. Maybe as a counter to his distance in the workplace Fred is reinvented as "Dad" in the twentieth century, becoming a warmer person who takes on fun and educative activities with the children and less emphasis as the disciplinarian. For example the newspapers of the between war years are full of pictures of dad's at the beach and taking children camping. The holidays and the weekends were the time for dad who was seen as mum's occasional helper in the home.

Having made breadwinning his main role, the great depression and its huge unemployment shook Fred's family authority even further. It put many men back in the home but in such shameful circumstances that it was clear that paternal involvement was not the main goal of Fred the father, money was. And it showed how fragile was Fred's position in the companionate family as he often had to leave home in search of work.

The Second World War took Fred away from home and sometimes he did not return. Many women moved into the workforce and got a taste of work life and the breadwinner role. In a way this was the precursor of women moving into this final role of fathering, that of the breadwinner in decades to come. But the war also boosted Fred's role temporarily as it restored him to bread winner after the depression and evoked the most ancient father role of all, the protector. His absence at war also promoted a widespread discussion of his importance as a father which shows that in those days society still held strongly that Fred was important.

The war ushered in the period of the so called fifties, which really was the period from 1945 to 1965 and could be thought of as the last flowering of the turn of the century Victorian family. In these post war years of the baby boom there was a return to the certainty of the family roles that had been disrupted by the depression of the thirties and the war of the forties. With increasing prosperity and the state supporting working class families into their own homes the ideal Fred was the "family man". He returned home from work with his paypacket to the suburbs and his doting wife, cared for children and hearthside pleasures. The fifties version of the New Father was enhanced by a shorter working week and suburban capture.

It is paradoxical that the fifties New Father is now called the Old Father, and we find he is unable to show the emotions we wanted from him. It shows us that each generation is seeking a less distant and more emotionally available father and man. With Fred's fading authority in the home we have seen a softer more emotional and democratic ideal of a father in the home sought for by each generation. However with the separation of home and work Fred had to straddle two conflicting cultures. The workplace and its competition and ambition and his home based on patience and kindness and cooperation.

The seventies saw the beginning of the end for the modern nuclear family that had its rise in industrial and colonial times. The sexual revolution, women's increasing dissatisfaction with their sole homemaker role, rising divorce and the breakdown of marriage, and out of wedlock births have presided over its demise. And our foremost legacy from its passing is the death of Fred as we have known him.

LAWS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

The place of the male wage earner and female homemaker was cemented into place with various cultural practices, laws and policies over the last one hundred years.

During the years 1880 to 1920 the ideal of the sentimental nuclear family ruled by a mother and a wife became dominant in New Zealand growing out of the cult of "sentimental domesticity" which spread from Britain. The productive functions of the family decline and emotional ones become significant.

This was propagated by the campaign against alcohol, New Zealand's largest social movement of the last century. This campaign targeted "unattached irresponsible males" and offered the vision of a stable family serviced economically by a hard working husband who brought home his money, and protected by a moral mother who kept her husband pure and women virtuous. Bread winning became central to fatherhood and failure to support a family, always a grievous sin, becomes centre stage.

Women's qualities as mother and guardian were constantly evoked. Truby King started the Society for promoting health of women and children in 1907 and elevated the significance of motherhood in furthering the Anglo Saxon race by building character in the child. This was clearly the mother's job, not the fathers.

The Education Act of 1877 provided for compulsory schooling, removing the economic value of children. The Workers Dwelling Bill of 1905 made it easier for families to have houses and subsequent labour governments greatly increased the availability of state advance loans. Unions pressed for a family wage claiming that the male breadwinner should be paid sufficiently so his income alone should support his wife and family.

FAMILY MEN, PROVIDERS, AND DADS

Emphasising the importance of the family man, WW1 recruitment focused on single men and out of 124,000 men who served for New Zealand only 832 married men reached England by the wars end.

The depression of the 30's on the other hand put many men in the home through unemployment, but the central lesson of this was that paternal involvement was never the main goal of father. Money was.

The emphasis of the two great wars also made popular the idea that a father needed to be involved in the raising of boys to prevent them turning into sissies (and therefore not useful as soldiers).

The ideal of father as "family man" of New Zealand in the nineteen fifties returned home with the pay packet to a doting wife and well cared for children to enjoy home pleasures.

A 1936 Women's Weekly suggested boys be taught "fathercraft" at school and cited examples of "changing tap washers, mending a broken window chord and dressing sonny's cut knee". Men were seen as incapable of housework, at best growing vegetables and fixing things.

The biological achievement of fatherhood was held to be important proof of being a man and not a "seedless raisin".

COPARENT

With the women's movements of the past three decades we have seen emerge the ideal of father as "co-parent", sharing with the mother the day to day care of the child. This ideal imagines the roles of mother and father as interchangeable as women move into the workplace.

Where the rationale of the "dad" was to share the needs of the child's development the rationale of the co-parent was for the father to share equally the burden of the childcare. Now the expectation was that their participation would make boys less stereotyped and more nurturing.

It can be argued that this model of the "new father" as it is being described in the popular press is a cultural myth that doesn't reflect reality, and it is clear that father as a breadwinner has not disappeared but is strongly held.

With the advent of the single parent benefit the provider role is mediated by the state that pays the usually female single parent, and collects money from the liable parent. The message continues to be that fathers are expected to be providers of children regardless of having contact with them.

In the current context of diminishing commitment to marriage and the nuclear family we have seen recently the discussion of the welfare defaulter or what the Americans call the “deadbeat dad” who avoids his expected provider role for his children.

WHAT IS FATHERING?

There are certainly many possible responses to this question. One way fathering can be thought of is as an “energy field” which helps a child differentiate from their mother and develop their identity in the outer world, and for boys the field which helps him develop his male identity. Fathering is a bridge over which a child can be drawn to a place to loosen itself from the power of the mother’s identity in order to establish its own.

If this is the case then the challenge for men in these times of so many homes without men, is to evoke this force generally in the community. Anywhere there are children, especially boys, men’s job is to be conscious of generating a father field that surrounds them and gives them access to the experience of being a man.

In the words of Robert Moore, “If an older man isn’t blessing a younger man then he is harming him”. He is harming him by denying him the substance that will draw him into wholeness as an adult.

CONTEMPORARY MEN’S MOVEMENTS

The contemporary men’s movements in Britain, Scandinavia, Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand, are exploring the cultural stories that shape men, in a way that the recent women’s movements have done. Men are taking stock of the consequences of being ushered into a masculine world based on doing, providing and achieving. And as men develop more competence in the “unmanly” art of expressing feelings we are hearing of the immense grief men feel at the absence of an emotional connection with their father.

This is fuelling a desire to make a change in their fathering of their own children, and we are seeing the beginnings of a move into seeing fathering as a manly and satisfying thing to be engaged in, with specific and different functions from that as a mother. Some of the current discussion amongst men is to do with creating what this fathering could be, and challenging the idea that the “new father” should merely be a fifth wheel on the car of mothering.

In schools we are recognising the symptoms of the “under fathered” boy who clings desperately to the façade of a hyper masculinity, based on distant media and sports figures in the absence of any real deep contact with a father figure. This should be a wakeup call to all men concerned to support boys in growing up to be a whole person.

But the notion of men moving en-mass from the wilderness of their isolating conditioning and preoccupation with the workplace into the home and engaged

fathering flies in the face of the reality of the decline of the nuclear family. A large percentage of our homes don't conform to the two parent ideal. And for those that do the great New Zealand experiment of economic rationalism has led to most families needing two incomes to maintain their standard of living.

Here the cultural challenge facing us is to invent new forms through which fathering takes place. The future of fathering is intrinsically linked with changes men create for themselves.

As men continue the trends of previous generations to do the work of creating a more generative, emotionally competent ideal for themselves the models of fathering will reflect this. The possibility of the future is that fathering is a force for cultural change extending far beyond the family man in his various guises. The possibility is that a "generative masculinity" is evolved that becomes a shaping force in our cultural institutions, politics and economics that challenge the cold and distant creations of our rationalist forefathers.

This "fathering" expresses a masculinity that is in harmony with the evolutionary impulse of our times that seeks to bring distant institutions and hierarchies into relationship with the body, and with real people and their needs. And it is a masculinity that has common ground with various of the women's movements.

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