

Santa Barbara News Press, Santa Barbara, CA, 3/25/07

Gangs and the Curse of Fatherlessness

(appeared as “Gangs become surrogate fathers for boys”)

By Gordon Dalbey

The recent deadly State Street gang fight in broad daylight begs the lesson of a *Los Angeles Times Magazine* cover story entitled “Mothers, Sons and the Gangs,”¹ in which several mothers of young gang members pondered sadly why their sons had gone astray. As a man, I was startled by what they didn’t say.

“I don’t understand why he goes out on the streets,” was the gist of each woman’s grief. “I’m a good mother. I keep a clean house, I go to church, I don’t run around with men, I cook for the boy, wash his clothes, and provide a good home. Why doesn’t he want to stay here?”

No matter how righteous and fine a homemaker his mother may be, a boy is drawn to the gang by the innate male longing and need to break away from the mother, bond to the father, and be joined thereby to the company of men. Without the father to engineer that process, the choice for a young male is ominous: either join a gang and get killed or go to prison, or stay with Mom and starve in a cell of femininity.

We’re not talking politically correct ideology here. We’re talking about the heart of a boy and the core stuff of manhood. Certainly, these are good mothers, wholly worthy of honor and respect. In fact, I suspect their sons genuinely know that. But these mothers are not fathers, nor can they be. The finest woman’s best is not good enough to usher a boy into manhood. Our “modern” civilization has forgotten that this is men’s work, properly done by the father and the community of men.

Ancient civilizations knew this. In the last two verses of the Hebrew bible, God promises to “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:6NIV). Jews not only understood this precept, but practice it today in the Bar Mitzvah rite of passage for boys. After two years of studying his heritage at the feet of his father and older men, the boy stands at last before his congregation and declares, “Today, I am a man.”

¹ Sue Horton, “Mothers, Sons, and Gangs,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 10/16/88, p. 8.

Years ago, as a math teacher certified by the US Peace Corps, I lived among the Ibo people in rural Nigeria, and was humbled by the dignity of my high school students, who had no shoes—and shocking as this may sound, neither X-Box or iPod—but had something far more valuable: a secure manhood, certified by their fathers and the old men of the village through a fearful but defining initiation rite.

A boy who does not grow to see himself as a man among men lacks an inner-directed maturity, a sense of his own identity. He'll let anyone define him. Indeed, he seeks someone to do it. If his father does not do it by affirming his talents and character and drawing the son to himself and other men, the boy will not grow up confident in his calling to become a responsible, productive member of society. He can only yield eventually to the world's self-centered, destructive definitions fostered by the media: "You're someone who needs a light beer, a gun, a fast car, plenty of money and women."

When, eventually, he realizes these definitions do not address his true and deepest longings--that the world has duped him--the young man becomes angry. He's spent his best energies, and has no manhood to show for it. The fear of being exposed as inadequate drives him to find shelter from shame among others who share his brokenness.

The gangs are thereby surrogate fathers, and their violence is a misdirected vengeance against males/fathers who have abandoned them and a society which has misled them.

No doubt, in days to come, we will hear much official rhetoric about getting tough on gangs and the violence they often stir. Certainly, law-abiding citizens have a right to be protected from violence. But restricting behavior, while at times necessary, is not sufficient to heal the heart. Gangs, that is, are symptoms of a deeper disease among us.

This disease, which infects an entire generation of men today regardless of race, status, or age, is the curse of fatherlessness. We will not likely hear so much about that, however, because so few men today, no matter how high their social position or authority, have dared face this awful emptiness in our masculine souls which makes gangs and violence so attractive. Much as an alcoholic uses a drink, often we use the police and courts to avoid facing our own problem.

You don't have to be young and poor to understand what drives a gang. You just have to be real.

Let's do our part to uproot the cause of gangs. Let's get real together as fellow men and confess at last our common longing for fathers. Let's learn to support, encourage, and hold each other accountable. That is, let's begin together to father ourselves and thereby prepare a community of real men to invite boys into.