

Mother and Child Reunion

Have we broken the attachment bond?

Children need attention, affection, acceptance, admiration and sometimes admonishment. An infant is utterly dependent on someone else to be fed, clothed, changed, bathed, held and soothed, day or night. To care for a toddler, a 10-year-old or a teenager can be even more demanding, requiring different skills at every stage. Some say the selflessness required has only one source. "He's a kid only a mother could love."

Mother and child are literally connected during pregnancy. Oxytocin, the bonding hormone released in both bodies at birth and during nursing, powerfully cements the attachment. A father also feels a bond to his family. His ability to protect and provide for them is central to his self-respect.

Our misguided society consciously tried to break the attachment bond in Aboriginal families by taking children away and educating them in residential schools. This was done "for their own good," so they could succeed in the white man's oh-so-superior culture. What parents gave children wasn't considered nearly as important as their assimilation and independence—so they would no longer have a claim on government support.

Children broken by this system often became broken adults. The suicide rate is high among Aboriginals. Now the Alberta government makes more children wards of the state than any other jurisdiction in the world, and a disproportionate number are Aboriginal.

Should the state have the right to forcibly seize children? Separation hurts parent and child. If state "care" is worse—and by most accounts it is—confiscation is even more deplorable. Certainly a good society protects its weakest members. But this perpetuates a vicious cycle. Obviously children are vulnerable.

What's less obvious is that distressed adults can be vulnerable too: incapacitated by their own damaged childhoods. We all want healthy, happy families, and we want a society that makes it possible for us to do this ourselves.

We may all have been damaged by the misguided beliefs of an earlier age. My mother's generation was discouraged from nursing their babies: told it was primitive, unnecessary and ruined the shape of their breasts. This was routine advice from male doctors. Nestlé and other corporations made fortunes selling formula. The natural bond between mother and infant was weakened, but it was a relief for overworked women who needed to sleep through the night.

My generation was told, "Biology is not destiny! You can do anything a man can do!" This time the message was from women. After eons of being treated as inferiors, many women took up the challenge. We discovered that a woman could match the most hard-hearted, greedy, power-hungry male top dog in the world.

Women don't depend on men financially anymore. In our economy both parents work. We think children will grow up fine anyway. Few parents today have the time to give it their full attention. Few women or men are stay-at-home parents. Our very capacity for attachment is weakened. We think we don't need each other. Even the unrepentant Alan Greenspan, architect of the collapse of the global economy, admits that our culture of unbridled individualism no longer constrains self-serving, rapacious behaviour that was unthinkable a century ago.

People can be transformed, when they have children, from a culture of separateness to one of attachment, closeness, connection with others. It may be love.

It may be what there's just too little of.



ALBERTA VIEWS STAFF

Founding Editor
JACKIE FLANAGAN

Associate Editor
EVAN OSENTON

Art Director
STEVE ARTHUR

Departments Editor Advertising
BETH ED
403 243 5334 (ex. 1)

Circulation and Administration
NICOLE KAJANDER

Research/Proofreader
JOE WILDERSON

Controller
KELIE JENSEN

Calgary 403 243 5334

Toll Free
1 877 212 5334



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208-320 23 Avenue SW, Calgary, Alberta T2S 0J2 Telephone: 403 243 5334
Toll-free (in Alberta only): 1 877 212 5334 Fax: 403 243 8599

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