



# How To Be a Better Mother

The mothers to which we're most attached are failing us.

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*“The 'mother myths'—that all women are nurturing, that mothering is instinctual, that maternal love is always unconditional—stand guard in front of the cultural cupboard where taboos and secrets are kept.”*

— **Peg Streep** (Streep, 2021)

*“Motherhood is the one job where, the better you are, the more surely you won't be needed in the long run.”*

— **Barbara Kingsolver** (1993), author

To know a parent requires knowing their children. The grandparents are also important as they molded the current family, but the parents' relationship to their dependent children has a greater effect on the future. I have deep knowledge of a dozen parents and their children, and these relationships are laboratories where personalities are formed.

This piece is less about mothers per se, and more about their effect, and how attitudes are passed between generations. We talk about nature versus nurture, and by this we mean the difference between

what's genetically inherited and what's learned by experience. There is a third effect. It's the learning that happens in the interaction between them: what develops from our biological aptitudes and inclinations. The cross-pollination between nature and nurture is another mechanism of change.

We don't understand or present other people correctly. People are neither independent of each other nor dependent on each other, and the mother-child relationship is the clearest example of this. I have had more fruitful conversations with my mother now that she's been dead for ten years than I ever had or could have had when she was alive. You may claim that I'm not really talking to her, and I'm only talking to my image of her, but that is the only person I ever spoke to!



## **Mothers and Children Forever**

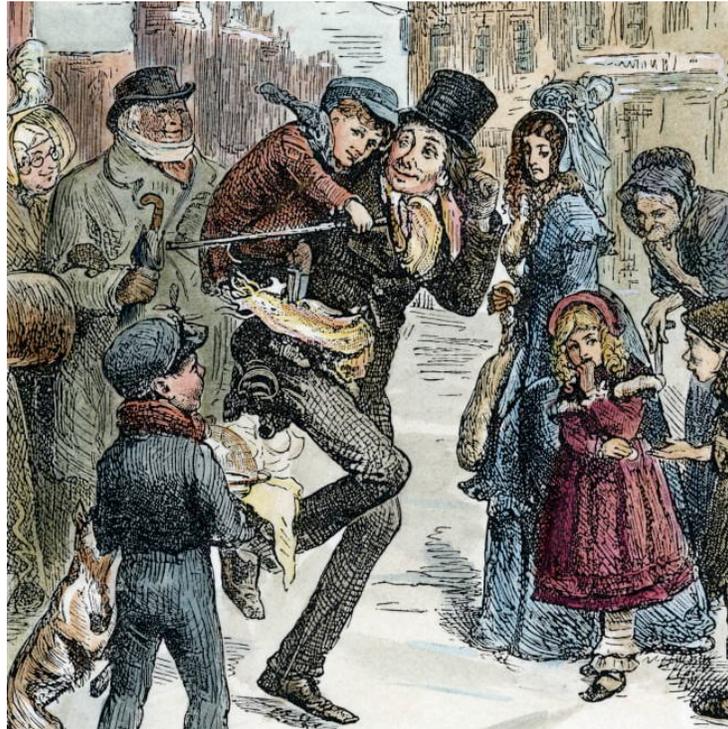
I've been thinking of my mother all my life, and I'm sure I will think of her for what remains. This isn't an obsession, it's a puzzle. My mother was especially puzzling because she was a visual artist and did not express herself directly. As I review other mother-child relationships, I find they are puzzling too. What they all share is a lack of awareness, and that's not for lack of trying on the part of the children. Most mothers are guilty of a lack of reflection.

Adults are generally unreflective. We might ask whether the property of insight diminishing with age is genetic or cultural. I think it's cultural, as I've known many elders who are reflective, and they tend to be less culturally bound people. I am attracted to wise elders, but they are a minority. They have reflective, childlike qualities that are largely absent from other adults.

Being childlike requires of measure of irresponsibility, not in a bad sense, but in the sense of being curious and exploratory. You can appreciate that most adults are not curious or exploratory because they have too many responsibilities. To be playful means being unrestrained.

We think of the traditional father as being the provider. This is sexist, but it's an attitude that can prevail even when both parents are working. What I find more disturbing than the sexism is the

implication that external resources are more important than internal ones; that the provider's role is more critical. This over-appreciation of materialism and under-appreciation of development has a pernicious effect on families.



## **Ghosts of Christmas Past and Future**

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is a warning against the dangers of selfishness and a reminder of the importance of family. It tells of the dismal consequences of greed set against the warmth of generosity. It is yet another misconstrued dichotomy that doesn't exist in the natural world.

The patriarchal provider is given more importance than the matriarchal nurturer. This is a two-sided deception. Both roles are contrived. The moral lesson is false, as should be obvious, because Western society exaggerates both.

We don't combine selfishness with generosity, or integrate miserliness with altruism. We alternate between them. The mindsets that we're taught, those of being motherly or fatherly, are unreconciled. The carriers of these two poles, the mother and the father figures, resonate with each other.

Dickens' story is popular not because it endorses generosity, but because it excuses selfishness. Scrooge is redeemed by becoming more benevolent in the context of the Victorian system, not by reforming it. The story is a celebration of the nuclear family.

## **Families Cross Generations**

I judge the mothers I have known based on their children, and those children based on what I know of their children. I see an attempt at improvement that extends through generations. It probably extends beyond the generations of which I'm aware.

Mothers' behaviors are defined by their mothers, as they try to do better for their children than their

mothers did for them. They succeed in obvious respects and fail in subtle ones. The obvious areas are material. It's easier to judge and assess material needs. I see mothers trying to be more fatherly: to better provide for their children than their mothers provided for them. It seems we're more cognizant of our losses.

I see mothers failing to appreciate their children's developmental needs. I think they fail to appreciate their own developmental needs, as this is a general feature of us all. The most obvious developmental need is the need for family. The need for combined maternal and paternal support. Mothers seem to judge themselves more important than fathers in the development of their children. This is part of our gender bias.

In the nuclear family, development is the mother's responsibility while material support is the father's domain. The family failures we observe run along these lines, where each parent acts out their frustrations by abdicating their assigned role. The traditional form of rebellion involves the father squandering resources and the mother rejecting responsibility. Of course, both parents are ready to justify their behavior.



## **Undoing the Family, Betraying Oneself**

For a person to subvert a role that defines their self-worth requires self-deception. We can expect deceptions. The paternal betrayal is more logical. The rebellious father simply claims that he (or she) needs more material support. The maternal deception is emotional, with the mother claiming that she (or he) isn't being emotionally supported. These are deceptions in both cases, as they rest on internal inadequacies.

Families may be considered to be broken when the parents are separated, or broken when they're heading toward collapse. You might say the blame for dysfunctional families always rests on both parents. That may be true, but it misses the point. Parents even blame the children when they run out of excuses.

From what I've seen, I lay the blame for broken families on mothers. I'm biased, I'm male, and I come from an Eastern European lineage of families that has generated its own culture. I also come from a family in which my father was more supportive of me than my mother. I also gave my father more

credit because he seemed to have emerged from a more damaged childhood, but I can't be sure.

*“'A man can do this and have no contact with their child, and it's acceptable,' says Katy. 'But if a woman does it—and I still have contact with my children—people do think I'm a bad mother, [that] I've abandoned them. I thought I was doing the best for them.'”*

— **Maddy Savage** (2022), journalist

The culture of one family is linked to other families with similar structures. I may simply be a product of families in which the mothers instigated the ruptures. In my family of origin, and in the two family's of which I am a parent, it was the mother who failed to support the family. I'm speaking of the family as a unit; I'm not saying that the mothers failed to support the children.

In the families I created, my partners broke the structures. In their families of origin, both of their mothers failed to break or recognize dysfunctional structures. It's almost as if my partners did to us what their mothers failed to do for them. This does not exonerate the fathers who were part of the problem, but the fathers were not taught to be developmentally aware.

It's only in the case of my own mother that I wonder if her mother was abusive to her while her father failed to protect her. To find evidence, I must think back to conversations from 60 years ago, between my mother and her parents, but memories formed in other contexts are unreliable.

There could be other cultures in which the fathers are expected to hold the family together. While it's more common in our culture for fathers to abandon their families, this has not been my experience.

*“Mothers who abandon their children tend to be judged far more harshly by society, and by their children, than fathers who do the same—though not because of outcome. According to various studies, including a 1994 report in the Journal of Family Issues, children raised in single-father homes as a whole fare as well as those in single-mother homes.”*

— **Peggy Drexler** (2013), journalist

This attitude of judging mothers harshly pervades the culture. The mother is tasked with holding the family together, but hasn't the mental resources to do it.

I feel the Western breakdown of families is instigated by the motherly force. It's easy to argue that the nuclear family is harder on mothers.

There is an attractive logic to this. Western culture is materially strong and developmentally weak, and development is seen as the mother's domain. But there is also a deep antipathy toward mothers that's connected with the West's paternal caste structure. Where the father fails, the mother is expected to succeed in spite of a lack of authority.

Both parents may be frustrated, and the children will be the first to express the family's failure, though they're rarely listened to. Yet it's the mothers who have more insight into the developmental dysfunction than the fathers. The sad thing, at least from a child's perspective, is that the rejection of the nuclear family—which is ultimately positive—hurts the children in the present.



## Living the Old Problems

Mothers, fathers, and children are unhappy. This reflects developmental, material, and cultural failures. Each family member projects their dissatisfaction on the culture and on each other in different ways. These projections don't seem to resolve themselves within a single generation.

This is the important point: when a large and interdependent structure changes, all of its smaller structures must also change. Reforming family involves reforming a host of relationships and requires the reconsideration of semi-separate identities. And while I do hold mothers more responsible than fathers for the fracturing of the families I have known, this does not mean that mothers are wrong for their actions, or that not acting to fracture the family would be the better course.

My key insight is that family dysfunction is multi-generational. The broken families I know are less dysfunctional than the unbroken families of their parents. That is, in most cases, this generation's broken families are closer to finding balance than the "intact" nuclear families that preceded them. Those intact families were psychopathic.

*"Never before have family relationships been seen as so interwoven with the search for personal growth, the pursuit of happiness, and the need to confront and overcome psychological obstacles."*  
— **Stephanie Coontz** (Coleman , 2021), historian

At least the broken families of this generation are disconnected from the nuclear model. It's too bad that today's broken families cannot find better structures to support the development of their children. In my case, I feel the divorces were irresponsible, but then I'm stubborn. The process of family reformation might require multiple generations.

*"Our increasingly me-first world might have something to do with it. According to a study published in the journal Social Psychology and Personality Science, clinical narcissism—defined by heightened feelings of entitlement, decreased morality and a dog-eat-dog mentality—has increased by 30% over the past 20 years."* — **Peggy Drexler** (2013)

This is a lesson for us all: families are not only dependent on each other in the current generation, but they depend on each other across generations. The family struggle you experience today is not simply today's struggle, it's a struggle from previous generations that will continue in subsequent ones.



## **Gardening Across Time**

This is what I hate to admit: we can't fix our family relations in one generation. It seems that families can rarely fix their dysfunction while remaining whole. In most cases, one person's personal needs collapse the family structure. That need may have its roots in this generation or in previous generations. More often than not, healing these fractures must wait for work done in subsequent generations.

A family does not exist "in the now." Families are like waves, or like melodies: you cannot make sense of them at any instant in time. They play themselves out.

The way to be a better mother is to recognize this. Because I've seen mothers who act precipitously, I appeal to them: stop breaking apart dysfunctional families and, at the same time, stop accepting them. Doing either of these things extends the dysfunction and the reformation across generations.

What mothers should do—and all family members have to do—is be more active and less reactive. Act more to imagine and create what is functional, and act less in reaction to what is dysfunctional.

If the mother is the family's emotional engine and the family is to remain whole, then that engine must act more with more positive emotional effect. I am avoiding the admonition to act more rationally because that's not the object; the object is to be constructive. This division between emotion and rationality is chimeric, it's an unreal separation; it's part of our cultural delusion.

What's needed is a whole, constructive vision of the family, and all family members need to be committed to it. This vision is not entirely female; males need to become emotionally sensitive as well. It's fair to say that the culture needs this. That sounds like it is another story, but I suspect it's the same story: the culture mirrors the family.

*"I know only this: that when my mother told me she had not been the mother to me that she wished she'd been, she became that mother for the first time."*

— **Tara Westover** (Coleman, 2021), author

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