

For Want of a Mother, the Village Was Lost

By Erin Pickett



“It takes a village to raise a child” is an old African proverb made famous by Hillary Clinton. Well, with all due respect to the Senator from New York, when the village is full of single parents or families where two parents are earning incomes, the children are often the ones left holding down the huts, to the detriment of the entire tribe.

Now, I’m a newfound stay-at-home mom, and before you raise your hackles at me, I’m not extending my arm to reach around and pat myself on the back for the sacrifice to my career. Sure, I went to graduate school and yes, I did study for an exciting career in behavioral neuroscience research and of course, that education avails me little these days when I’m struggling to get lunches packed in the mornings before waking the rest of the family while the dog tackles me for his morning walk. But I’m awakening to a whole new world these days, and I’d like to show you what I’ve found.

You see, I was raised by a very independent and self-reliant divorcee of the early seventies. Not only was I indoctrinated into the belief that I had a right to an education and the freedom to pick any career I desired, but I was told I had no choice but to become educated and career-driven. After my mom’s first unsuccessful marriage, she was convinced that self-reliance was the only hope for women, and women meant her and me especially. Even as I played with my baby-dolls and desperately craved the EZ Bake oven that I never actually acquired, I was being primed not to be a wife and mother, but rather an independent self-starting go-getter who might or might not grace a male with my live-in presence.

The economy over the last three decades has further conspired against my deeply repressed desire for a pre-1960’s lifestyle. Somehow, with all us independent career women running around changing the world, the world suddenly got a lot more expensive. The first hint that something was amiss was when I was on maternity leave with my new daughter back in 1994. The hint? I didn’t want to go back to work! How was I going to leave this precious being who relied solely on me to think of her best interests in the hands of a trained stranger or worse, her groggy half-awake father? I stalled and hemmed and hawed, but finally my husband did the math in front of me: If we wanted cable (he did) and regular trips out for dinner (we did) and occasional trips to the spa (ok, that one was all me) then I needed to be working too.

We were younger then, and my husband was new to his field, and over the last 10 years he’s grown to become a major skill at his job. Suddenly, we had a significant salary increase, and did what all good young American couples do: we moved into another price range of lifestyle. Enter the Lakelands.

Everything was going fine, if you discount the fact that I had to leave early in the mornings to get to work in Silver Spring which left my husband to get our daughter ready for school and himself ready for work. Never mind the 40 days tardy record...move along, nothing to see here. Never mind the fact that I’d get home to pick her up from Nana’s as late as 6:30 pm, hardly able to keep my eyes opened to enjoy some time together, and don’t mention reviewing homework, practicing multiplication

tables, or other less-fun and often-overlooked parental tasks. Never mind that her teacher began reporting a significant lack of focus in the classroom, or the B+'s that became solid C's, or the air of despondency or the regression of self-confidence. We had a nice home in a nice neighborhood, and cable, and dinners out and even occasional trips to the spa. Anyway, we had the village to help, right?

That was a long school year. It seemed like it was setting the stage for a lifetime of hatred of learning. I wanted to blame the teacher, my daughter, the system, but finally realized that I was the one who was dropping the motherhood ball. It just clicked, is all. A revelation from my long-distant foremothers, maybe. My repressed desire to nurture, to find my calling in the house as wife and mother, totally fit like a glove my daughter's need to be nurtured, for my husband to have a wife and my daughter to have her mother. And to heck with the cable, and the dinners out, and hour-long professional massages be damned! (sigh!)

Would it be nice to not have to worry about money month to month? Sure. But not as nice as seeing my daughter's confidence grow because I'm here to make sure she understands her homework. Would we like to have extra money to invest in the market or travel more or just randomly toss around on the interest-of-the-moment? Of course. But have you seen the smile of a man who has walked in the door and for the 12th day running, had some new delicious smell awaiting him in the kitchen? I am woman, see me barefoot in the kitchen! I stand in the doorway of my own hut, overlooking the village common as my offspring returns home from school, and I am hugely fulfilled.

Recently on a trip with my mom, we sat next to a woman about my mom's age, and after mourning the state of the shrinking icebergs in Alaska her conversation turned to the women's liberation movement in which she had been an active participant. She turned to me in mid-monologue in the most curious way; as if I, the next generation, should properly extend her a personal thank-you for the efforts she took. I think she was a bit miffed by my response, good-natured but pointed: "But no one ever asked me if I *wanted* liberation. What I wanted was an EZ bake oven."