

A Mother's Pain

Over many years of practicing family law certain patterns of behavior in families have become evident to me. While the family law practitioner is not ordinarily trained in family therapy or psychology, certain fact patterns regarding family behavior seem to repeat themselves in divorcing and divorced families so as to represent a discernable pattern of behavior in the family dynamic.

In what I have come to refer to as the "Mother's Pain" syndrome has emerged in my view as an ongoing source of emotional harm leading to chronic depression and even more serious mental illness in a large class of our society, namely divorced mothers of adolescent boys. (Although this pattern is probably not exclusive with mothers of boys it has most often existed in the mother-son relationship in my experience).

The usual pattern as I have observed it is a consequence of a bitter struggle between husband and wife, when the mother has obtained the primary custodial care of her boys and the father has to pay child support, provide medical insurance and has less custodial time with his son or sons awarded to him. In most instances where the syndrome develops the father has been a rather controlling individual with a high egocentric personality and usually with a dismissive attitude towards lawyers, the law and the court system.

In order to make things right with his boys, Dad embarks on a program designed to encourage the boys to have a deep disrespect for Mom. This is particularly the case when Mom engages in a new adult relationship either post divorce or after a prolonged period of separation between the parties. In such events she is often described as a slut, or whore and the new friend or partner is no good or worse he is said to be an interloper in the family and not worthy of respect since any affection which Mom shows to this male is characterized as disrespect to the child. On the other hand Dad's new relations are treated as wholesome and fun to be with.

The result of this game is that the boys decide that they want to spend more time with Dad than with Mom, as Dad provides cars, motorbikes, motorcycles, boats and sports activities, accompanied with financial incentives. The result is that the mother goes to court to enforce her parental rights. Since the law gives adolescents a right to choose which parent with whom they wish to spend time, there is ordinarily a court directed change in primary custody and the residence of the boys and with it a reversal in the payment of child support, with Mom now paying support to Dad. Of course, the orders all seem to award the mother with liberal weekends and weekday visits with her boys, which never seem to materialize. The enforcement of such visitations is more a fiction than a fact as the courts usually leave it to the boys's schedules as to when they will spend time with the mother, if at all. As the estrangement between mother and son grows deeper, the more depressed the mother becomes. At first the mother's typical behavior is to try to secure therapy visits with mother and child both attending. After one or two such visits, the primary custodial parent, namely, the father, encourages the son not to attend and is normally quite diffident about therapists and family therapy and he states that he regards therapy as nonsense and a waste of time and money. Dad usually wastes little time in imparting his

opinions to the boys At this point the bond that has existed between mother and male child seems to the mother to be irretrievably broken. Mothers who carried the children since inception and birth and cared for their needs until adolescence cannot accept the total wrenching of that bond and grow increasingly ill both physically and mentally when they find themselves incapable of fixing it. They first turn to their attorney, who like most lawyers tries to make things right or at least take some action to obtain relief for their abused clients. It is frustrating to me to have to tell a client that there is little that can or that will be done by the court to deal with this situation. Turning to the family court does not ordinarily remedy such as situation, as the court is powerless to find the child in contempt for not visiting with his mother or else the court doesn't have the time or the resources to delve in depth into what caused the situation to evolve and in many instances takes the position that if it is what the child wants: that is controlling and the court puts the matter to rest in that way.

In the most severe case that I have observed the mother became so depressed that institutional care was required, which did not remedy the situation and that mother has endured a permanent breakdown and emotional illness. In the normal situation, the mother has come to me with a history of lack of sleep, an inability to stop crying, a feeling of helplessness and in some cases a breakup of any new relationship in which the mother has engaged. Once the father has gained this degree of control over his family and prior spouse there seems to be no turning back and appeals to the former husband and father to submit to family counseling to attempt to reunite mother and child are rebuffed as the father is now exacting his punishment on his ex-wife that gives him continuing control over the family dynamic and he wants the situation to continue as it feeds his need to be in control.

What about the effect of this dynamic on the boys? They are led to believe that women are bad and cannot be trusted. They learn that the proper way to treat a woman is with scorn and derision, because that is what they have learned from the experience. They have been carefully taught that not only has their mother mistreated their father but that she has become disloyal to her sons. In this situation they gain the approval from their father and they have learned that disrespect for their mother endears them to their father. They have now come to believe that any other way of treating the mother would not be in their in their best interest.

Thus the situation becomes perpetuated. We know from long experience that the average woman, having gone through such a contested divorce where custody was an issue is ordinarily economically unable to afford hiring the needed experts to assess the situation and pay to bring the expert into the courtroom to try and show the insidious pattern of behavior on the part of their ex spouse which brought about the situation in the first place. The father, in my experience, is usually in a better financial position in such a case to hire and pay the expense of a reliable expert to counter such allegations and in many instances points to the mother's frail mental condition as justification for both the divorce as well as the primary custodial placement change.

How do we as a profession remedy this ever-increasing syndrome? Or is the system through lack of will or financial resources willing to ignore what I believe is a generational perpetuation of misbehavior on the part of the male child who has become a trained bully...