

How to Raise 'Em Tough in a World of Chaos

A woman I knew in college who later became an important figure in Planned Parenthood often stated her aversion to bearing children. "Who would bring a child into today's world?" she'd say. "Look at the mess we're in."

That was 47 years ago.

Today when I tell some people I am a father and grandfather, some people echo the same sentiments. "It's an awful time to raise children," these folks say, filled with sympathy. "I sure wouldn't want to do that responsibility."

No matter how many times I've heard it, this response leaves me stunned for several reasons.

First, it lacks any historical perspective. Did Americans in the Great Depression make similar comments? Did people then decry couples having babies because of tough times? Did couples after World War II decide to forego children because of the atomic bomb? History has witnessed many more tumultuous eras than our own, yet human beings living through the Fall of the Roman Empire, the Black Plague, the Thirty Years War, and other cataclysmic events still bore children and tried to raise them as adults.

Moreover, we are living in an age when technology and medicine virtually guarantee healthy newborns and healthy children. Want to talk about an awful time to bring a child into the world? If we go back only a century, we find staggering infant mortality rates. Bringing a baby into the world and raising that child to the age of five in 1900 was a risky business.

Of course, when people comment about our awful twenty-first century, their pessimism has nothing to do with either history or infant mortality. They are instead referring to our wrecked culture, to what they see as a collapsing world, even the end of Western civilization. A close friend thinks we are already past the point of no return, that the culture will continue its slide into deviancy and decadence, that long-cherished Western values handed down to us from what some commentators call "Jerusalem and Athens" are in danger of being snuffed out, to be replaced by such concepts as tolerance (which often becomes intolerance), relativism (which leads to chaos), and democracy (America was founded as a republic. Democracy often leads to anarchy or dictatorship.)

While not as pessimistic as my friend, I recognize the precarious position of our culture and traditions. The battle cry of Stanford University in 1987—"Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture's got to go!"—remains true for many today.

So what do we do? How can we prepare our children and grandchildren not only to face these challenges, but also to work at a restoration of Western values? That task seems immense and daunting, indeed impossible, for mere individuals.

Not so.

To bring change to the world we must first bring change to the tiny bit of the world we inhabit. To raise tough children—and by tough I mean, as the Boy Scout Oath puts it, children who are "physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight"—we begin with our own children and grandchildren. An array of practical means exists for achieving these goals: teaching such subjects as history, morals, and manners, encouraging our young people to participate in sports and exercise, giving them heroes and role models, teaching them such necessities as thrift and housekeeping, and dozens of other avenues for learning and acquiring skills.

Thirty-five years ago, my wife and I bought the Palmer House in Waynesville, North Carolina, named for Lena Palmer, who in the 1890s had expanded and opened the house to tourists. The inn had been closed for two years. Vines grew to the third floor windows, the tin roofs leaked in a dozen places, and the plumbing was a nightmare. The entire fifteen bedroom, ten bathroom house had to be cleaned, repainted, and repaired, and we did nearly all the work ourselves over a period of almost two years. Relatives and friends pitched in on this herculean task.

As we refurbished that old house, we lived by two mottos: "It looks better than it did" and "Focus on the job at hand." The former offered encouragement, the latter thwarted discouragement over the many tasks still to be done.

Abiding by those mottos helped us bring a ruined house back to life. They might also serve as watchwords in the restoration of our battered culture.

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