Opinion
Guest Voices

(Unsplash/Anne Nygard)

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Mostly, Father's Day is dizzying.

I'm currently in the middle of a decade-long stretch of Junes, when at least one of my four kids graduates from college, high school or middle school. To see these once drooling, crawling critters strut across the stage, hug friends and embark on new adventures is amazing and rewarding.

But mostly, it's dizzying.

What happened? Where did the time go?

To sit next to these almost adults as they finalize a resume or college personal statement (in which my cherished fatherhood memories are transformed into their own actual life stories) is easily the best Father's Day gift I could ever receive; certainly better than the many well-intentioned "Dads Matter, Too" news features and social media posts that call for attention every third Sunday in June.

Last Father's Day, The New York Times ran the headline: "Dad Brain is Real, and It's a Good Thing." It was a fascinating report about groundbreaking scientific research, but I couldn't help but notice the implication: Turns out, fathers are not genetically stupid.

The sometimes humorous public discourse around fatherhood took a serious turn in January with the second inauguration of Donald Trump. The ideas about family life held by MAGA's most ardent supporters can be controversial, to say the least.

From JD Vance's call for higher American birthrates, to Elon Musk's very large blended family, to the broader online "manosphere" and its fascination with "tradwives" and vigorous masculinity, the simmering debate about 21st century parenting is likely going to boil over sooner rather than later. That this conservative faction is also synonymous with a narrow version of Christianity obscures the many ways that faith communities have actually helped build stronger, healthier and more inclusive models for family life. But this does not change the fact that the evolution of fathering is still a work in progress.

In a fascinating new book entitled Fatherhood: A History of Love and Power, author Augustine Sedgewick looks from Aristotle and Augustine to Normal Rockwell and Bob Dylan, and finds that while "fatherhood is often used as a metaphor for origins and history, it has none of its own. … We remain a mystery to ourselves, without even realizing it."

What we know, Sedgwick adds, is that men came up with all sorts of rules to disempower women and children, while "liken(ing) themselves to gods." This in spite of the fact that "for mortals, such expectations can only end in failure and frustration."

If today's chronically online bro-fluencers want more "traditional" families, they might start by looking at the hyper-capitalist economy that is hostile to any semblance of work-family balance. Much work remains to be done, literally and figuratively, when it comes to males contributing more inside the home, beginning with a close examination of the expectations we set for our sons and daughters when it comes to chores or the care of younger siblings.

One of the great American myths — reinforced by chauvinists as well as feminists, at times — is that women didn't work outside of the home in "the old days." This would be news to generations of working class and immigrant women who labored — often under unsafe conditions — to make ends meet, as scholars like Dorothy Sue Cobble have shown. They also worked inside the home so that the man of the house could, ironically enough, relax after a hard day's work. How males got to be seen as the strong ones only proves that we can never underestimate man's capacity for self-delusion.

(Unsplash/Tim Mossholder)

Last year, The New Yorker magazine asked, "Should We Expect More From Dads?" There is a familiar snark that often hangs over fatherhood debates. This is kind of like asking: Should we worry about climate change? Or the poor? The obvious answer: Duh.

Yet even a cursory glance at crucial issues intersecting with fatherhood — education rates, health statistics and economics — suggest there's plenty about this debate that's actually not obvious. If manosphere bros want to bring back the days when fathers were less involved in their children's lives, the rest of us have to offer a compelling, alternative vision that goes beyond snark or sarcasm.

This month, my oldest son graduated from college and is hoping his years of volunteer work at our New Jersey parish will translate into a university graduate school teaching assistantship. I know this because I've talked to him about his hopes and fears when we spend time together, because this is what fathers should do. Not because it's a burden or a duty, even less because it's trendy or "woke." But

because time with our children is the best Father's Day gift any of us will ever receive.