

CHAPTER 20

The Single-Parent Family

Many children are growing up in single-parent families. The reason for this may be the death of a parent or it may be divorce. Sometimes, if parents are alcoholics or drug addicts, they are deprived of parental rights and their children are forced to live with someone else. In recent decades many couples have had children without marrying, and in such cases usually the mother raises her children alone.

One-parent families exist all around us. Almost certainly you know some children who live with their mother, with their grandparents, or perhaps with their father. Sometimes it seems there are almost no ideal families around.

Every family has its own customs and problems, but there is one thing most will agree upon—each of us would like to live in a family in which we are surrounded by the love of both parents. If our own family does not measure up to our ideals, we may feel pain. If this is the case, we first must understand how to keep our dignity under the circumstances and learn to grow up to be a harmonious and loving person. We need to see ourselves not as victims but as survivors. Even if we personally have a



good family, someone very close to us may be living in a one-parent family. In this case any love, wisdom, and understanding we provide not only will help our friend but also will help us to learn and grow.

A single-parent family

If you live with only one parent or with a relative, it is important for you to understand that you are by no means inferior to other children. Having only one adult in your family does not degrade your value as a person. Ultimately the kind of person you will become, and what you will attain in life, depends on you, not on your circumstances. Many outstanding people, including the founders of the world religions, began their lives under very sad circumstances.

Overcoming difficulties in life can help us to become loving, responsible people, if we find enough love and strength within ourselves. By working through our life challenges we can help those around us who need support and understanding. In this way we become more mature and gain experiences that will help us in future difficulties. But this is possible only if we overcome our difficulties with love, keeping our dignity and helping others, rather than isolating ourselves and indulging in bitterness.

Of course, this advice applies to all difficulties, not just those resulting from the absence of a parent. Every one of us faces tribulations in our life, and we have to learn to deal with them. It is very important to be able to find a positive dimension in any situation, no matter how unfair it might seem.

Only then can we grow from the experience and turn it into something positive. Many extraordinary people realized this, and saw in this very approach a real way of overcoming difficulties. In fact, all of Dostoyevsky's works are permeated by only one theme—the way through sufferings and deprivation to real beauty, real humanity, wisdom and love.

Overcoming difficulty

In any situation the most important thing is to not limit yourself with a negative focus on your own troubles. Try to see the problem from the viewpoint of other people. Help others despite your difficulties. By doing so, you often can solve your own difficulties.

For example, if you are a boy living alone with your mother, what can you do under the circumstances? You can choose to resent the whole world and your mother and to live with this constant resentment. But what is gained? Yes, the situation is not fair, but you can solve nothing by resenting your fate. Is there a better choice? Yes, there is. Try to find some positive aspects to your situation, no matter how hard it may be. For instance, while there may not be a father beside you, there is still a mother, grandmother and grandfather who love you dearly. Some people may not have even that.

Most of us tend to compare our circumstances with people whose life is much easier than ours, and therefore it seems that we have been wronged or deprived of something. Quite naturally questions then arise: Why me? What for? Why am I worse than others? Then we begin bearing a grudge, become



I had suffered because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.

A Religious Dimension

When life puts difficulties in front of us, we often begin to feel inadequate. It seems that we are not as good as other people. (Haven't you faced a similar situation yourself: "Oh, you have no father? Your mother can't afford to buy you decent clothes? Sorry, but you are not fit for our company!") But it would be wrong to believe that our value is determined by external circumstances that are beyond our control.

Many religions state that each human being is unique and God's child. From this point of view, no matter who your parents are, whether they exist or not, whether they are criminals or alcoholics—you are a unique person and your value is absolute. Each of us is an embodiment of the ultimate divine nature that is reflected in everyone in a different way. We are all pieces of a big puzzle. Each piece is absolutely unique, and none can replace another. Even if only one piece is missing, the picture will be incomplete. Life works in a similar way. We are all unique, and the picture of the world would be incomplete if any of us disappeared. Here is the way various religions express it:



Buddhism: Every being has the Buddha nature. This is the self.

—Mahaparinirvana Sutra 214

Christianity: Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?... For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.

—1 Corinthians 3.16-17



Judaism: Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God. But it was by a special love that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God.

—Mishnah, Abot 3.18

Islam: I have breathed into man of My spirit.

—Koran 15.29



Hinduism: The shining Self dwells hidden in the heart. Everything in the cosmos, great and small, Lives in the Self. He is the source of life, Truth beyond the transience of this world. He is the goal of life. Attain this goal!

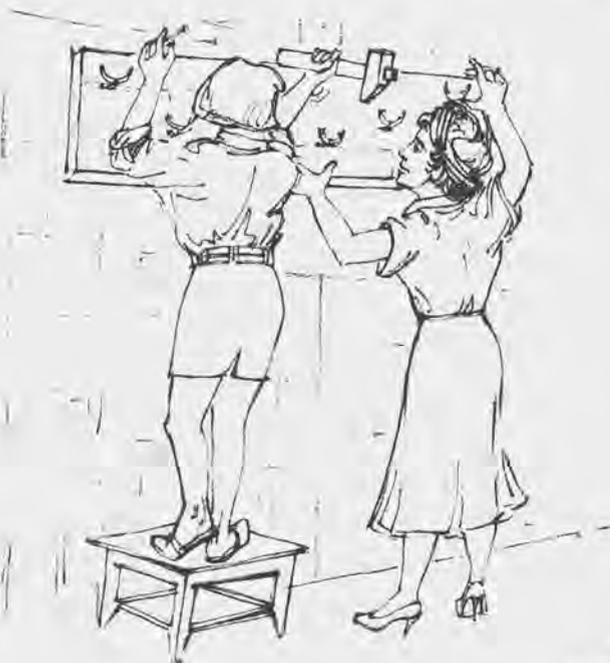
—Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.2



gloomy and sulky and see nothing but the awful injustice everywhere. Our problems, instead of being solved, accumulate. This attitude leads us nowhere. But when we remember those whose life is harder than ours, we feel new strength to overcome our difficulties.

On the other hand, when you try to see the situation from your mother's perspective, you will realize how hard it must be for her. Your life is ahead of you. It may be very successful, you may have a lifelong love, interesting work and travel. Your future depends only on yourself and what you make of it. Life is there to be conquered by you. Your mother, on the other hand, works very hard—mostly out of necessity. We often think about love and how important it is to us. It fills our dreams and thoughts. Your mother, too, in her youth must have dreamed about the love of her life. Nevertheless, she remains alone with you. And she has far fewer hopes for the future than you. You are her brightest hope now. Can you imagine how difficult it must be? Your mother most likely hides her sorrows from you. When you reach that kind of understanding, your personal problems will seem not so bad at all.

The wisest way is to become a genuine man, so that your mother knows she has someone to rely upon. What does it mean to be the man of the house? Of course, there is an external side: hanging the bookshelf, repairing the electric iron, putting a leg on the chair, etc. This is important because doing so shows that you are grown-up enough to share at least part of your family's responsibilities. But there is a deeper aspect too: feeling responsible for everything that is going on. When difficulties arise at home, you are ready to bear part of the problem and give support as well as protect your family. This will make life easier for your mother, and it will help you later when you have a family of your own.



A girl growing up without a father

Any hidden resentment you may feel toward your father may turn into resentment and mistrust of all men in general. This may create challenges in creating your own family. In situations like this, the best way is to find something positive and dwell on that, rather than the negative. Being a girl, it may be easier for you to understand your mother. Through such understanding, compassion will grow between you—a deep understanding of each other's pain and problems. On the base of this emotional intimacy, it will be much easier for you two to overcome all difficulties with dignity.

When there is no man in the house, your knowledge about the world of men may not be as full as if you had brothers and a father. It is advisable under these circumstances to develop relationships with other men who may take on the role of a parental figure, such as uncles, teachers and your friends' fathers. Creating healthy relationships with father figures in your adolescence will help you to overcome many of the challenges that might arise in future partnerships.

What are the consequences?

In spite of the difficulties that come with growing up in a one-parent family, there is still a way for you to become a deep, mature, grown-up person.

But it is also necessary to understand the nature of the situation and the impact it has on your life. Realizing this may help you to avoid the same mistake in the future.

All of us dream of love. But infatuation often brings people to have sex without thinking of the consequences. Suddenly the girl is pregnant. What do you think will happen next? Almost certainly her child will grow up without a father. Even if the father does marry the mother, statistics show that such urgent marriages are the least stable. The question arises: Do you really want to sacrifice the future of your child because of your current infatuation? This is of concern not only for girls, although in most cases it is the young mother who takes care of the child. But what would the "dad" feel, knowing he has a child somewhere who certainly will be challenged by being fatherless? If we think about it, we may be led to make more responsible decisions.

Imagine you are married. It would be naive to suppose that there will be no problems or conflicts in your marriage. How can you solve them? It is no secret that people nowadays part even without a serious reason. They are just tired of each other. Love has gone. Someone has been betrayed. And what about the children? Maybe this discussion will help you in the future, when you encounter difficulties in your own family.

Returning to our theme of discussion, it is important to remember that we have no right to accuse anyone, especially our parents. The only thing we can do and must do is to help them as well as ourselves. We should determine not to repeat any mistakes our parents may have made, and we must become responsible persons not only for our own sake but also for the sake of our future family.

For Your Journal



- Do you think that a child from a single-parent family will have more responsibility than other children his age who live with both parents? How will it influence his growing up?
- In what ways do we learn how to communicate with members of the same and opposite sex through our family relationships? Give examples of how girls learn to communicate with men through their relationship with their father. How does boys' communication with their mother determine the future style of relationships with women? How does life in a single-parent family influence children's ability to create relationships with people of the opposite sex? Are there any positive points?

Katya's Story

My name is Katya. My father died when I was thirteen years old. I have a sister who is seven years younger than me. Once my dad was gone I had to help my mom a lot. I became responsible for knowing where my little sister went after school and I did most of the shopping. My mom came to really depend on me, not just for shopping and taking care of my sister, but I was her best friend. My dad had been really strict with us when he was around, while my mom would basically let us do anything without asking. When I was a little older I could go anywhere and do almost anything I wanted. My friends had to be home at early hours and always tell their parents where they were going, but I didn't. It was fun in a way, and my friends envied me, but actually I wish that my dad had been there to guide me more. Although he was very strict, I really felt his love through his concern.

Then my mom got a boyfriend. He was a very good person. After a short while he moved into our apartment. Mom became much happier and I liked having him around. He never told my sister and I what to do, but always listened to our ideas and struggles. But I wish that they could have got married before starting to live together. I was embarrassed for my friends to find out. I also felt that my mom was not there for me as much. She didn't need me like she did before and that hurt. I still miss my dad. While he was alive I never realized how much I loved him and needed him.

Questions for Discussion



- How do you think the atmosphere in the home changed after Katya's father died?
- Do you think Katya and her sister feel more insecure?
- Why does Katya miss her dad so much?
- Why do you think Katya feels embarrassed at having her friends find out that her mother is living together with her new boyfriend?