

Harry R. Jackson: I Used To Be Black

Occasionally, I like to shock a congregation by joking, “I used to be black; then I became a Christian.” What I mean, of course, is not that anything about my race or ethnicity has changed, nor that I feel anything but joy in who **God** has made me. But it is my faith—not my race—that ultimately defines who I am. My **relationship with God** is the source of my **identity**.

I believe that most of the social problems we face today are rooted in an **identity crisis**. When we don’t know who we are, we can never understand what is expected of us or how we are supposed to behave. From a cultural perspective, we can see steady erosion in our understanding of what it means to be a responsible member of society that began with the Baby Boomers and has continued into the Millennial Generation. Being rebellious once meant being an outcast; now rebels are celebrated as heroes simply for failing to conform.

Our **personal identity** comes first from whom we belong to: our family and our community. Later, our **identity** may develop to include our profession, accomplishments, or even our hobbies and interests. And of course for billions like me, faith undergirds it all, giving every aspect of my identity meaning and significance. But many others, belonging to nothing, define themselves by their rebellion.

Divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing have resulted in millions of individuals missing that crucial first step. They never experience the security that comes from belonging to a loving group larger than themselves. Over one third of American children are growing up in fatherless homes. Multiple studies (including many from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) confirm that children raised without their fathers are far more likely to drop out of school, commit

crimes, abuse drugs and commit suicide.

Even two modern presidents—Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—grew up without their fathers. Writing in *Parade Magazine* on Father's Day 2009, President Obama said this:

In many ways, I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence—both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill. We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference. That is why we need fathers to step up, to realize that their job does not end at conception; that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one.

That “hole” (or “father wound”) produces a lack of identity, but for decades it has been primarily viewed as a socio-economic issue. It is true that children growing up without their fathers are also far more likely to live in poverty than children who live with both parents. However, as President Obama pointed out, addressing poverty alone will not fill the hole left by an absent father. According to a 1990 study by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, children from low-income, two-parent families perform better in school than children from high-income, single-parent homes. If we want to raise achievement and reduce crime and suffering, we must address the true source of these problems.

Although both boys and girls suffer when fathers abandon them, boys in particular struggle without a consistent model of who they are supposed to be. This has resulted in what many believe is a nationwide male-identity crisis. In a *Psychology Today* article entitled “Our Male Identity Crisis: What Will Happen to Men?” Ray B. Williams wrote, “In a post-modern world lacking clear-cut borders and distinctions, it has been

difficult to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one.”

Many of these young men are set adrift, looking for a purpose and settling for anything that feels like a family. We shouldn’t be surprised when they become part of a peer group with self-destructive tendencies or even a member of a gang centered on criminal activity.

The good news is that there is hope, if we are willing to face the true source of the problem. To address socio-economic disparities alone will be to continue to offer a Band-Aid for a gaping wound. We must admit the central importance of traditional marriage—the union of a father and a mother—to the stability and health of children. Only when we strengthen marriage will we be able to strengthen our communities. And we must cease the secularist hostility toward faith in God—the Heavenly Father who is the only One who can ever truly make up for the failings of an earthly one.

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