

The Killing of the Children

Roman generals declared that it was “a sweet and noble thing to die for your country.” Why would anyone sacrifice his life for an abstract concept? What is country – real estate, beliefs, language? Does it include the Other?

The decline of mythological thinking produced a polarity: individualistic, secular materialism, which expresses the predatory imagination; and fundamentalism, the voice of the paranoid imagination. Sociologist Max Weber called this condition the “disenchantment of the world.”

We idealize the family as the ultimate “safe container.” Yet we experience the breakdown of myth most directly in the crimes and betrayals that adults inflict upon children. Myth suggests that it has always been this way – or at least since the triumph of patriarchy.

Ouranos and Kronos are the original patriarchal fathers – distant sky gods – who symbolize the paranoid and predatory imaginations. The paranoid impulse arose from fear of those (significantly, one’s own children) who desired to claim their inheritance. Once the Other was defined by being rejected from the clan, the predatory mind could exploit him. These stories set the stage for generational conflicts that have been literalized throughout history.

Most significantly, Abraham – father of Judeo-Christian-Moslem monotheism – was willing to sacrifice Isaac to prove his loyalty to God. In many later versions, Isaac was indeed sacrificed, and he came to embody the only sacrifice acceptable to God. Generally, however, the patriarchs couldn’t openly admit such barbaric capability, so mythmakers projected child sacrifice onto the gods – such as Moloch – of other people. Othering.

God confirmed the most fundamental theme of Western culture when he abandoned his only son. When Jesus asked, “Father, why have you forsaken me?” he was quoting Psalm 22. Already quite old, it acknowledged centuries of abuse, betrayal and the profound depression – or unquenchable desire for vengeance – they produce.

These patriarchs have two things in common. First, they are narcissists who refuse to acknowledge the independent, subjective, personal souls of their children. Second, by refusing to bless their children equally, to share the abundance of life with them, they encourage sibling rivalry and establish the belief that all good things – from food to petroleum to love itself – are scarce, and must be earned through sacrifice.

For at least three millennia, patriarchs have conducted pseudo-initiations, feeding their sons into the infinite maw of literalized violence. Indeed, it was their great genius – and primordial crime – to extend child-sacrifice from the family to the state. Boys eventually were forced to participate in the sacrifice. No longer surrendering to symbolic death, they learned to, in a sense, overcome death by inflicting it on others.

Ultimately, sacrifice – dying for the cause – became as important as physical survival. Martyrdom became an ethical virtue that every believer must be prepared to emulate. “Uniquely among the religions of the world,” writes Bruce Chilton, “the three that center on Abraham have made the willingness to offer the lives of children – an action they all symbolize with versions of the Aqedah – a central virtue for the faithful as a whole.”

When the state replaces the fathers, boys must become patriots (Latin: pater, father) to become men. Those who most excel in this madness become sociopathic killers and – significantly – mentors to future generations. These initiations always contain both a threat and a deal: You will sacrifice your emotions and relational capacity, submit to our authority in all matters and become our mirror image. In exchange you may dominate your women, your children and the Earth as we abuse you.

Yet don't we idealize our children? We love children because the archetypal child symbolizes rebirth, transformation and innocence. But here is the problem: the child personifies the lost unity adults long for – which adults, however, cannot recover without being psychologically “dismembered.” Thus children also evoke the suffering to be endured on the road back to wholeness, and the grief over what we have lost. Consequently, many adults are compelled to destroy that image, to remove it from consciousness and replace it with idealization.

Why else would we emphasize family values and threats to “the children” while punishing children simply because their parents are poor? In truth, we are deeply ambivalent about our children. “Some things,” writes David Bakan, “are simply too terrible to think about if one believes them. Thus one does not believe them in order to make it possible to think about them.” So idealization is the way we keep the secret.

“Americans,” writes Hillman, “love the idea of childhood no matter how brutal or vacuous their actual childhoods may have been.” We idealize childhood because our actual childhood did not serve its purpose, which was to provide a container of welcome into the world that would be the necessary precursor for initiation into mature adulthood. Without such preparation, we assume that alienation is the true nature of maturity. And if we have no animating spark, neither does the natural world. So young men are motivated to project their own need for rebirth onto the world and set out to literally destroy it. This is how Patriarchy perpetuates itself. In each generation, millions of abused children identify with their adult oppressors and become perpetrators themselves. They have no choice but to act out our myths.

And what of those who direct the carnage? War allows the old to enact the sacrifice of the children. They project their ambivalence toward their own uninitiated, “inner” children onto actual soldiers, while safely and vicariously experiencing Dionysian intensity. War is an end disguised as a means: deferred infanticide, the revenge of the old upon the young.

The killing of the children is the sacred secret – sacred because no one will speak its name – underlying all of our civilized values. Indeed, all three themes that I have explored in *The Bacchae* intersect with each other. The regular sacrifice of millions of youth in war and the repression of women engender tremendous grief and rage, which modern society represses with its patriotic rituals and consumer culture. The rage of uninitiated men always threatens to emerge as the return of the repressed. If allowed full voice, such rage would tear society apart (as it almost did in the 1960s); hence the need to identify and demonize scapegoats. Periodically, and especially during times of rapid social change, our traditional Others are not sufficient to siphon off our destructive violence and keep it to a manageable level. Something else is needed. So we send the young off to war.

Europeans brought more than greed, dreams of freedom and missionary zeal to America. They carried an ancient load of self-loathing. They were looking for someone to bear it for them, so they could return to innocence.

