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Ben Jonson's Warning for Fathers

by Matt MacDougall

(English 2220 Online)

As a father of three small children I found myself deeply struck with Ben Jonson's two elegies for his lost children. *On My First Daughter* and *On My First Son* should resonate with any parent. My first read of both poems was when my youngest daughter was under 2 years and my son, 2 months. Having two children close to an age where it's more likely for them to have a serious health problem made me consider closely my role in their lives and what I owe them as a father. Seeing Ben Jonson who fathers each of his poems, mourn his actual children in verse, shows the responsibility all fathers carry and the care we must take in developing our children's lives.

Ben Jonson's insights into fatherhood are something largely missing in American literature according to Armengol. He states, "Most canonical authors appear to avoid dealing with the issue of fatherhood, which thus remains largely absent from American literature." and goes on to cite a couple dozen examples of the absence or corruption of fatherhood from the mid 1800's to present day. With the death of his children Ben Jonson shows us his heart as a father in language that Parfitt calls unusually direct. It is this direct language that helps Jonson's work transcend time. More specifically it is the honesty that is a product of his direct language that allows most any reader to connect to what he is saying. At the death of a child, I imagine it impossible to hide behind falsehood when speaking or writing about such matters.

A father is responsible first to his wife and next to his children. We see this axiom in *On My First Daughter*. In the first line Jonson speaks of the grief shared with his wife, and the second introduces his daughter Mary. Jonson further identifies that Mary was born of their youth, acknowledging the shared loss of their own brightness as parents. While the child may be under the age of innocence, the parents are not and must endure a terrible trial. Jonson had a questionable marriage to Ann Lewis, which is regrettable but perhaps, partially a product of such grief. The absence of more information about their marriage leads me to believe their relationship did not hold the importance it should in their lives. However it is still worthy to note the images of Ann in this poem. Mary rests in the comfort of Ann's tears. As fathers we rely on our wives to be that comforter for our children. As leaders of the household, we often find ourselves incapable of emotion as honest as weeping. I imagine Jonson's face frozen as he writes this, fully honest but detached from the world.

In *On My First Son* Jonson again sheds no tears in the death of his seven year old son. This must have been much more difficult for him. Some may think this death would have been more difficult because Ben was a boy and Mary a girl but I believe it's the age of the child. Men are not bonded that close to a child at six months. Most of the child's life at that point is weaning and sleeping so the father doesn't have much of an opportunity to become close to the child. I love my three month old son but I don't like him yet. All I see of him now is how he doesn't sleep too well and generally gives my wife a hard time during the day as she is forced to manage all our children at home. Losing an older child I've bonded with would be a different world of difficulty. I can think of nothing on earth that could come close to comforting me. Like Jonson, I too would look beyond Earth for peace. As God's son sits at his right hand, so was little Ben the right hand of his father. Jonson takes everything on himself, thinking it sin to hope for the life of his child. Blaming himself for any loss in this life is all he can bring himself to do. At this point Jonson is empty. I cannot help but look at my own children and consider that I too am powerless to save their lives. I may hope in

doctors if they were sick or better yet hope in The Lord for their constant care but their lives are largely out of my hands. The only thing I can do with consistency is to be there for them. I can make them smile, I can discipline them, I can simply be the father I should. Jonson gives me a kick in the right direction, knowing my children are not my own and can be taken at anytime. But as a typical man who's instinct it is to fix things, I'm inspired to greater, more consistent action in fathering my children even as I desire to be a father to my work.

Jonson certainly was a father at work. He fathered several junior writers known as his Sons or The Tribe. Jonson's fathering at work is also an example for me at home. O'Callaghan and Smyth tell us, "Good writing, according to Jonson, is the product of a lengthy process of reading the best authors, observing the best orators, and, crucially, gradually cultivating a literary style." Then on reading Jonson's *Discoveries* they conclude "One's 'natural' voice, in other words, is not natural at all, but the product of 'care and industry.'" In fatherhood as in authorship, it is important to remember that neither are born instantly, they take hard work. In Jonson's preface to Shakespeare's first folio he uses the image of Shakespeare as father of his work, "Look how the father's face / Lives in his issue". Perhaps the constant we see through the years is the attempt of fathers to do most of their fathering at the office. This appears to be the case looking at Jonson's biography and yet, even as a somewhat absent father, we see a man broken at the loss of his children and lamenting his time at work in the case of his son Ben. "Here doth lie Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry." At this line I break inside, thinking of the extra time I've spent at work, feeling attached to a project and wanting to make sure I craft it perfectly. All the time my wife is tirelessly working at home, currently glued to our little one such that my kids are often forced to sit in front of the TV as she tries to get our son to sleep. I am fathering my work and my children are at home dying.

Thank you Ben Jonson for allowing me to see your children. Thank you for so transparently showing yourself as father at work. You are my warning to live for my wife and children, not my office where fathering may be easier but where all is loss if I lose my family in the process.

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