

THE (LATCH)KEY OF LIFE

BY

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I will soon be twenty-seven years old and appear to be heroically well adjusted. My younger brother also seems to be a respectable adult with no noticeable neuroses. All this in spite of being prototype "latchkey kids." I can't imagine we are the exception proving the rule that all so-called latchkey kids are or soon will be juvenile delinquents.

I have read about the trauma on these children caused by social evolution. Fathers have always been the breadwinners, and now mothers choose to or have to work outside the home as well. The children thus do without the after-school presence of a mother, and in the evening maybe even have two tired parents rather than one. (Assuming they have two parents, but that's another matter.) Perhaps their parents even ask, or force if you wish, the children to take some responsibility around the home.

While I do not mean to disparage the writers and comforted readers, the stories rouse my cynicism. I have been unimpressed and see many of these articles placed for reasons other than dissemination of information.

The stories exist so parents and children can feel sorry for themselves and their plight. In the essays, the reader sees him or herself as an unfortunate and unwitting participant in a wide-spread social dilemma. They take solace in not being alone, and that makes it better.

More importantly, the articles give parents an excuse for ignoring their children. Obviously no mother wants to think of herself as unfit. Being compelled to work and thereby unable to be home for the kids is a tidy, guiltless way of blaming "the system" and relinquishing responsibility for her progeny.

On the other hand, the articles may make good parents feel guilty for being less than the ideal (which is a criminal fiction to heap upon them, anyway). These people would be wise to avoid projecting themselves into the articles and remember that parenting, like every other social act, is a matter of degrees. There is no entirely right or wrong approach. If the children are decent and well behaved – as much as kids can be – then the job was well done.

The effect of these stories on the children is equally ruinous. Making the latchkey kid an object of pity, gives him or her license to be irresponsible, even criminal. All indiscretions and antisocial behavior, deficiencies in moral and social character, now or later in life, can be conveniently laid off on childhood trauma. I don't buy it.

As a product of the latchkey experience, now experiencing the million trials and tribulations that are life, I feel justified in my criticisms. Not having a mother to open the door and cram cookies in my face when I returned from school has not impaired my existence.

Unless I am mistaken, this latchkey kid phenomenon is centered on nothing more than a child returning home from school to an empty house and being responsible for his or her actions for a few hours. That we accept these few insignificant hours to be critical to the child's healthy development is perverse. Apparently, the other 90% of the week has no bearing on the issue.

My experience is not atypical. Not long after my brother was born, our mother returned to working with our father in his legal practise. My brother and I were left with our grandmother or one of many nannies, some of whom were wonderful old ladies, others who were thieving carpetbaggers. We managed quite well nonetheless.

As we grew up and went through school, our parents always worked. My brother and I knew no other way of life. Because there were no other options, as it was explained to us, we (usually) cheerfully amused ourselves during those hours after school while our parents were occupied. We rarely had much trouble.

For the most part, our after school hours were not spent home alone. We lived eight miles out of town, which prevented us from going directly home. Instead, we waited quietly in an unoccupied room at the office, or elsewhere, until six o'clock; then we would go home with our parents.

We were able to do homework during these hours, and of course there were other things to keep us entertained. We were active in sports and could join games in the gymnasium or on the ball diamonds. In the winter we were run ragged playing hockey. And, if all else failed, the library was always open. It's no surprize that we developed a healthy love of reading and excelled scholastically.

Certainly I would be less than honest painting a picture of my brother and me as angels. Like every other teenager, we had our moments, whether it was those first furtive tugs of illegally procured rye whiskey or fighting for some ridiculous reason. We were not regulars, but definitely not strangers in the school principal's office.

The salient fact, however, is that we were timid in comparison with our friends whose mothers did wait for them after school. All kids, regardless of their social situation, will get into trouble: it's called experience. My brother and I were normal and perhaps even precociously responsible because nothing less was expected of us.

Being latchkey kids was not a traumatic experience for us. Neither of us identifies with or relates to the gibberish we read about latchkey kids' traumas, in spite of being the model. Of course, at the time we were not inundated with articles telling us how unfortunate we were, and how emotionally stunted we would be. Our childhood was understood as normal and made easier by the care and love we got during every other hour of the day.

Our father coupled teaching skills with a love of hockey, and coached our hockey teams nearly every year from when I was seven. This kept us together with our father most nights of the week and on weekends. He instilled in not only my brother and me, but in our teammates as well, a gentlemanly respect for propriety. The fathering he gave us was often in the company of twenty other boys, but we got it.

As a busy lawyer, work often tore our father away for days or weeks at a time. Ensuring that our lifestyle was maintained was his duty. We knew that when he was preparing for court, for example, he was not to be disturbed. Even as children, we understood this was hardly child abuse. Today, when I insist that roommates, friends, their children, and my dog leave me alone to write, I think back on those days.

Our mother came home from the office after a hard day of work, and would prepare dinner for the family. With rare exception, she did this for over fifteen years. She was also comforter, disciplinarian, nurse, and crying post. A backbreaking chore, but she did it because she is a practical woman who took her role of mother seriously.

But our mother was by no means a martyr. She did everything possible, catering to our many demands even in ill health. But when the burden was too extreme, she wouldn't do it: tough. It was impossible for her to be a housewife, and we had no maid, so the entire family pitched in. My brother and I would become role-model, nineties bachelors because we were in childhood compelled to housework. This was training true enough, but it was essential for our family.

I suppose our parents felt slightly guilty, even though they eschewed as nonsense the idea that two unsupervised hours on weekdays would be our undoing. We were bestowed with a fair abundance of material goods. Lest you get the notion that we were brats blackmailing our parents for toys, these were never surprises brought on platters of silver nor were they particularly excessive. They were most often rewards.

One example remains overwhelming. During the summer when I was ten, my father was in court for fourteen weeks, sixty miles away from home. My mother bore up admirably under the circumstances: she operated a law office without a lawyer, tended to a ten and a seven year old on summer vacation, and ensured workmen on the yard did their jobs.

During those weeks I was left at home to tend to the house and garden (which included yard work, preparing meals so there was less for mother to do, and housecleaning), watch over the workmen, and look after my brother. My brother and I were sometimes neglectful of our chores; we were children, after all. But for the most part we discharged our duties conscientiously, if not zealously. We had been given an important function in the family and did not want to disappoint.

At the end of the summer, I was presented with a minibike for my performance. One may consider this to be a form of bribery or a contemptuously rich gift, but it's a matter of proportion. In the sense that I took on enormous responsibility for a ten year old, and that our family had the financial means, it was reasonable.

Taking on or being bestowed with more responsibility than reasonable for one's age is how children stretch and grow. But parental recognition of the efforts made in accepting the responsibility is essential. Its absence is the foundation for resentment and rebellion. The reward itself depends upon the greater or lesser means of the family and need only show appreciation for effort and maturity.

We were latchkey kids, but also part of a close family unit. When we could afford it, the family would take a winter vacation together. Only one time did my brother and I not go along. Travelling and seeing the world broadened our horizons and brought us closer together as a family.

I often look back on my childhood, comparing it to those of my friends, and it seems both better and worse than it was. But as the years pass the emotional peaks and valleys erode to a smoother line, and I think more appreciatively of those years. If this is how I were to relive my childhood, experiencing things that my parents' absence could afford, I would gladly be a latchkey kid again.

I feel sympathy for neither latchkey kids nor their parents. Being a child and taking household responsibility are not mutually exclusive, nor is it too much to ask. If coming home to a locked house door is the most significant problem in the child's life, then he or she is far too sheltered. The responsibilities of parenting are legion, and as much as the decision to have children was conscious, so

should be the decision to parent properly. I find it wholly unimaginable that in a strong family, fifteen hours a week can be blamed for all a child's ills.

Ward, June, Wally, and Beaver never really existed. The ideal they presented was fiction, and even at that we can't be sure that Beaver didn't ultimately become a shoplifting crackhead. Life presents no guarantees, only chances.

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