



# JOHN TRAVIS:



## Why Men Leave— A Hidden Epidemic

**M**en leave their families in a multitude of ways. Even if they remain in the home, many fathers are often emotionally absent—through depression, workaholism, violence or abuse (physical or emotional), or a retreat into addiction to substances, media, consumer goods, sports, food, or sex.

Most men in the “developed” nations today never bonded (or very poorly bonded) with their mothers. Most people don’t even notice how disconnected modern people are from each other, compared to cultures where the bond is still intact. Yes, we talk of alienation and notice how much people in Mediterranean cultures touch each other, but we make no connection between these phenomena and how our bonds among each other, with nature, and with the divine have been torn asunder. I maintain that this unnoticed, silent epidemic is the source of most societal ills. Fathers leaving their families is only the tip of an iceberg.

As infants, most men in our culture have been bottlefed and subjected to other culturally-endorsed patterns of normative abuse, such as sleeping alone or being left alone to cry when their needs weren’t met. Biologically, the male is the more fragile gender of our species and developmentally lags years behind females—well into adulthood. Instead of getting the extra nurturing needed to compensate for being the weaker sex, by age five, males in almost all cultures get far less nurturing than females. It’s no surprise, then, that most of the

**John W. Travis, M.D., is a coauthor of the Wellness Workbook (Celestial Arts, 2004), and Simply Well (Ten Speed, 2001). He co-directs the Alliance for Transforming the Lives of Children, (www.aTLC.com), which champions a culture of compassionate individuals, families, and communities—who have fun with, learn from, and responsively and lovingly interact with children. He lectures on why men leave, and many other areas of wellness for both adults and children. His Wellness Inventory Online is available at www.thewellspring.com. John and his family divide their time between Australia and the United States. He welcomes feedback and comments at jack@atlc.org.**



unbonded boys in our culture grow into men who spend a good deal of their lives unconsciously seeking a mommy-figure to provide them with the nurturing they were denied as infants/children (fueled by advertising that prominently features the breasts they were denied). Part of their survival mechanism is to learn to deny their feelings and project their unmet needs for nurturing onto substitutes, such as women, and other externals, such as consumerism, workaholism, and other addictions.

-§-  
Even if they remain  
in the home, many  
fathers are often  
emotionally absent.

We unbonded men may manage pretty well in our marriages for a while, but when our “mommy” gives birth and suddenly turns her focus toward the newborn, we usually lose much

of the nurturance we were getting from our partners. This is almost inevitable given the demands on parents trapped in with what I call the nuclear family disaster (NFD) experiment our culture is trying. Mothers, especially, cannot begin to get their normal adult needs for nurturance met unless they are one of the few living in a tribe, close-knit community, or extended family.

The Northern European cultures have, in the name of civilization and progress, gradually destroyed the tribe/village/extended family/community and replaced it with the nuclear family disaster. This, in turn, has melted down into the single parent trap (SPT). These spread rapidly throughout the world as the northern Europeans busily exported their experiment in isolation to every continent but Antarctica, first via missionaries and conquest, and now via the media and multinational corporations. The consequences are immense, leading to overwhelming pressures of isolation, particularly for women, who often end up bearing the total responsibility of their children.

At the same time, our sudden exposure to an infant who has not yet been fully “trained” in the denial of her own needs—for suckling at the breast, being lovingly held in arms, being constantly in the presence of her caregiver, and so on—and expresses them vocally in no minor manner, will usually stir up our suppressed memories of our denied needs as infants, plunging us into deep pain—conscious or unconscious.

With the resulting increase in pain levels, we usually step up our adopted/chosen means of defending against our feelings—be it via medication, having affairs, rage, depression, addiction, or violence (physical or emotional). This is the first level at which men leave. When or if the defense mechanism fails, because the real need is not addressed, many of us think the only thing we can do is to depart from the stimulus and leave our homes.

Girls in our culture also get far less nurturing than required and suffer a similar experience of failed bonding. They have the opportunity, however, of recreating the experience of a secure bond through their unique ability to have a biological bond with a fetus in pregnancy (and the concurrent hormones). If they are able to preserve that bond by resisting our cultural norms and raise a securely attached child, they are often able to heal much of their own unbondedness, but witnessing this may simultaneously exacerbate the father's restimulation of his own primal wounds, trigger his defenses, and increase the likeliness of his leaving.

Since depression was my defense mechanism of choice, I understand that coping mechanism better than the others, but I believe my theory explains equally well why the other defense mechanisms, such as addictions and violence, similarly lead to broken bonds and the passing on of our trauma to another generation.

-§-  
The Northern European cultures have, in the name of civilization and progress, gradually destroyed the tribe/village/extended family/community and replaced it with the nuclear family disaster.

-§-

## Sourcing the Pain

I was born in the farmlands of western Ohio in 1943. Like most babies born in those days, I was dragged out of the womb, drugged (via my mother's general anesthetic, which took weeks to wear off), with cold, metal forceps, grasped by sticky rubber gloves, and plunged into bright lights—instead of being gently greeted with warm hands in subdued light. I was doubtless held upside down to drain my lungs (I'm not sure if I was slapped or not, but that was the norm of the day). Stinging silver nitrate was put in my eyes. I was wrapped in cold, scratchy fabrics instead of being allowed to mold my skin against the warm skin of the person with whom I'd been intimately connected for nine months. A little while later, I was taken to the nursery where I was placed in a plastic box beside Carol D., born earlier that day. I spent my next 10 days there (the norm for the early '40s). Arlene and Marlene soon joined me, twins born a few days later. I was given a cold, rubber nipple with a bottle of a fatty, antigenic substance instead of the miracle food that three million years of evolution had prepared for me.

Then, a day or so later, I was immobilized on a board and, without painkillers, the majority of the most sensitive nerve endings of my penis were amputated. Then followed the standard "normative abuse" parenting practices of the 1940s:



- 1) artificial baby milk—probably Carnation or Pet Evaporated Milk
- 2) a four-hour bottle schedule. I got hungry every three hours and cried that last hour, until I learned it was no use and made a decision about the world that is so basic to my brain's neural organization that it still impacts almost everything I do—"Asking for what you want doesn't work."
- 3) restraint in a crib or playpen,
- 4) deprivation of the continual movement of being carried in-arms
- 5) sleeping alone in a separate room.

Most of these "improvements" in child rearing were devised by men citing untested "scientific" ideas, all of which have since been

-§-

It may take a village  
to raise a child,  
but it takes a com-  
munity to keep the  
parents sane.

—Sobonfu Somé

-§-

proven to be destructive to human bonding. I don't blame my or other parents of that age; they naturally followed the cultural winds, and the promise of science and technology to cure the world's ills was, in 1943, still an untarnished vision.

I used depression as my primary defense from the start. While my primary defense appears outwardly as depression, it's just one of a standard set that unbonded children/adults cling to in their attempts to escape the pain of the early needs deprivation that still eats away at them. The others are addiction, violence, chronic illness, and ecocide (destruction of the environment)—symptoms of what James Prescott named Somato-Sensory Affectional Deprivation Syndrome (SSADS) in his early bonding research.

I created a "safe" world of my own in my head that allowed a sense of control (since I had no control over being fed, touched, or moved). The fact that I was disconnected from the matrix of my life by being isolated from others limited my ability to express my needs and get them met—hence the periodic depressions. No one recognized my depressions, including me, until I was in college—people just thought I was "quiet."

My condition is not atypical of most men alive today who were raised by "modern" cultural standards. One friend, though raised in California, was fortunate in that his mother was from South America. He was breastfed well past age two and has always seemed happier than any other person I know.

## My Stroke Supply

Having never experienced a nurturing mother, I've subsequently spent most of my life looking for a replacement.

I thought getting married and becoming a doctor would somehow fulfill me, so at age five I blindly set on a course of 22 years of school that would handle the latter, and assumed somehow the right "girl" would magically appear about the time I became a doctor. Although I had few social skills, I wasn't deterred in my belief that she would appear.

Much to my surprise, marriage midway through medical school didn't suddenly make my life better, just more complicated. My feelings of emptiness got worse as my depressions deepened. After three years of marriage and several crises, my wife said we had to have a baby or split. I thought I had to comply, since divorce wasn't an option in my family. Reluctantly, in 1972, I became a father.

It was great at first, the excitement of a new being, but then the reality hit—I was a lot lower on my wife's attention list. I began to get more and more depressed, leading eventually to our getting into therapy. There I learned I actually had feelings, and could express them, though with great difficulty—even to this day. We began learning about the unconscious patterns we'd been playing out in our symbiotic marriage, but seemed relatively powerless to change them. However, my experience with this reparenting therapy group became the basis for my pioneering work in wellness and, later, my observation that failed bonding/attachment leads to the need for remedial work as adults.

Despite learning a great deal about my inner workings, I still was depressed most of the time. When our daughter was two and a half, the pain became so great that I realized I had to leave in order to keep my own sanity, as I was sometimes close to being suicidal. I abandoned my first daughter, with whom I had never really bonded—clearly out of my own inexperience with this phenomenon.

The cycle began again with another intense, three-year relationship. I was still unconsciously seeking the mommy I never had, and while I reveled in the attention she gave me, it wasn't enough, and she felt drained by my neediness. It was around this time that I first heard of the book *Magical Child* and author Joseph Chilton Pearce's efforts to reframe children's legitimate nurturing needs, but I didn't think it had any applicability to me and subconsciously, I didn't want to stir up my painful childhood recollections. I tried to learn to love myself

-§-  
Having never experienced a nurturing mother, I've subsequently spent most of my life looking for a replacement.  
-§-



and follow the tenets of self-responsibility I was helping to promote at the time, all the while struggling with my chronic depression. I was only marginally successful. Deep down, something always felt wrong.

A year later I met and fell in love with an Australian, Meryn Callander. As our love blossomed, we were often challenged in our new-forming relationship, but we managed, and a year later, married. Meryn and I also began to work together professionally, first with authoring books, and then creating authentic community, especially for helping professionals who are often lonely and unable to connect with peers on an emotional level. It was through Meryn's studies of feminist spirituality that I became aware of the estrangement rampant throughout western culture leading to the authoritarian institutions that surround us, like medicine, law, and the educational system. I had been struggling with aspects of this phenomenon in my work with our Wellness Resource Center the previous seven years, but had no understanding of the bigger picture.

I thought I was gradually overcoming my depressions through continued work on myself in growth-oriented seminars I both led and participated in. Friends who had known me a long time could see a difference—years of hard work on painful issues were paying off.

One of the things that fed me the most was lying in bed at night in Meryn's arms, usually watching TV, and having my head, chest, or tummy stroked. We spent an hour several nights a week, doing that before going sleep, and 15 minutes or so in the morning, alternating who would cradle whom. Unlike the common male stereotype of always thinking about sex and wanting more, what I mainly wanted was nurturing attention from a mother figure, though I was only dimly aware of this. I would sometimes think something must be wrong with me for not being more sexually interested. Being held and stroked was the lifeline that kept me going, though I didn't fully get how desperate this need was until I lost most of it.

## Taking the Plunge Again

Like most of our friends at the time, Meryn and I assumed we would not have children together, but after 10 years, in her late 30s, Meryn's biological alarm went off. I couldn't imagine reopening the painful experience of being a father again. At the urging of a friend, I read Liedloff's *The Continuum Concept*. I suddenly saw the estrangement that we'd been studying was not innate to "the human condition," but a direct result of how we isolate babies and young children. Personally, I could also see how the old wounds I thought I

had handled in therapy were still there. I also thought I might make up for my greatest failure in life (being a father) and get it “right” this time with a new approach.

Until then, I had lived a pressured life of deadlines (self-imposed) using adrenalin to make myself accomplish things, always feeling like some unknown but dreaded thing was gaining on me if I didn’t have something concrete to show myself at the end of each day. I gave lip service to focusing on love and relationships as my highest values, but I was driven by the need to do something to earn my keep. This is still far more true than I would like.

For four years, early in our relationship, Meryn and I had lived a life of voluntary simplicity in the mountains of Costa Rica. We both longed to return to that simpler life. Along with our decision to have a child, we sold our big house, cut back on the seminars that we’d been facilitating, and bought 40 acres in a remote part of Mendocino County, California, seven miles past the end of the power lines.

We became homesteaders. I set about turning an unfinished cabin into a solar-powered home. We read and wrote intensely on attachment parenting. We prepared to give birth to our daughter at home with a midwife, complete with a warm water pool provided by a friend.

The birth went well, and while I thought I was now better prepared for becoming a father, I had no idea of the depth of pain and envy that would be opened up from constantly being with someone who knew what her needs were, expressed these needs, and got the nurturing every infant needs and thrives on.

And, as I should have expected, Siena’s arrival supplanted much of my nurturance, but I kept busy dealing with water and electrical problems. We quickly came to the realization that the “in-arms” attachment parenting we were attempting was designed for an extended family, not for our nuclear one. Bringing Meryn’s mum over from Australia to live with us helped, but it often seemed, given our commitment to Siena being constantly “in arms” until she, of her own volition, moved on, we still had an arms shortage.

While we provided her with a degree of physical nurturance unknown to most children in the West today, and she blossomed from it, our relationship got more and more strained. I went deeper into depressions, alternating with periods of hyperactivity to keep us

-§-

I had no idea of the depth of pain and envy that would be opened up from constantly being with someone who knew what her needs were, expressed these needs, and got the nurturing every infant needs and thrives on.

-§-



afloat financially and make up for the downtime of my crashes. It was unsustainable.

I tried to meet my own needs on a number of fronts: building, therapy, men's groups, and spending time in nature; all to no avail.

It was only after a year of soul-searching, moving across the country to Virginia in 1996, and finding an intentional community that appeared to fulfill many of the ideals for which I'd searched during the previous 20 years, that I found some peace with my process and began to write about it.

Despite half a lifetime of therapy and personal growth work, I still struggle with my barely suppressed rage, which usually shows up as depression, a chronic clenching of my jaw, and a knot in my stomach.

But even now, nearly eleven years after my second daughter's arrival, I am struck by the contrast between witnessing her needs being expressed and fully met, and how most of us were treated. I

-§-

If you have not found the gift in your own wounding, please keep looking.

-§-

spent over a thousand nights lying in the bed near her while she nursed. This gave me a new awareness of my own subjugated oral needs around which I've spent my whole life and career trying to compensate. While being with my daughter still sometimes activates deep and painful places in me, I see her as a spiritual teacher, challenging me to continually deal with the years of walled-in pain that keep me disconnected from the family/tribe/planet that is my birthright.

## The Road to Healing

My personal journey reveals just one of the many ways that failed bonding can show up in a family dynamic. Fortunately, it's within our wounds that our gifts are revealed. Certainly my work in wellness has been strongly influenced by my pain, and without seeing it in the larger perspective of a personal journey, I think I'd have just gotten lost in the suffering. If you have not found the gift in your own wounding, please keep looking.

A word of caution: after observing myself and others who have worked with these issues for over half of our adult lives, I am no longer certain that the childhood wounds of not having a secure bond with anyone—or the popularized euphemism for this condition “low self-esteem” (Liedloff describes bonding as feeling worthy and welcome)—can be healed beyond short-term breakthroughs and temporary remissions. But I do think we can learn to better manage our pain and be less controlled by it.

Depression is one of the largest public health problems in our culture, along with addiction, violence, and chronic disease—all symptoms of SSAD. The reactivation of this pain in our attempts to create a family of our own is a serious condition to reflect on before the birth of a child. I had, and continue to have, a difficult time with it, so I don't think it's easy for young people who naively enter into parenthood unaware of their own wounding.

To prevent perpetuating failed bonding among our young, further exacerbated by dysfunctional nuclear families—themselves an artifact of the authoritarian cultures—we need to recognize what a secure bond looks and feels like and begin challenging the normative abuse of detachment parenting we see everywhere.

We see and hear these myriad symptoms of alienation and failed bonding everyday in the news, but we never hear about the real cause—how we treat our babies and children. If we look closely, we can see these symptoms in our own lives, understand the real cause, and begin to get our own needs met with the support of self-awareness books and classes, support groups, therapy, and open honest communication with our family and friends, rather than being blind to and driven by our unmet childhood needs. Applying the wisdom found in publications like *Compleat Mother* and *Bryonchild* is a good start.

As more men become aware of the dynamics between their own unmet needs and seeing their children's attempts to get theirs met, the widespread denial of this problem will come out in the open and men will be better able to cope with their issues instead of denying, hiding, inflicting them on others, or medicating them.

Men will then be able to help society understand and own the wounds of unbondedness that have not only reached epidemic proportions in recent generations, but are also perpetuated by cultural and economic agendas. By re-creating communities, extended families of choice, and other as-yet-not-discovered ways of supporting each other in providing the nurturing we never got, we can break the cycle of abandonment and separation inflicted on children in the form of medicalized births, bottle feeding, circumcision, early day care, and the like.

When we face and accept our own wounding and when we can open our hearts to tend our own needs, we will unleash the compassion that gives us the strength to remain with our families and create a world that nurtures everyone.

-§-

We need to recognize what a secure bond looks and feels like and begin challenging the normative abuse of detachment parenting we see everywhere.

-§-