



THE SEXIEST MAN ALIVE

JIM GERAGHTY

Ward Cleaver, the iconic father of the 1950s TV Show, “Leave It to Beaver,” is... a stud. I’m quite serious. And, no, this isn’t about nostalgia for America in the 1950s. This is about a man of his time, yet timeless. But to appreciate him, we first have to get past the noise.

A loud corner of American culture has been rebelling against the image of the 1950s since, oh...the 1950s. Most of that scorn has been directed at the Ozzie-and-Harriet image of American suburban bliss, specifically “dad.” Well, enough already. Can we at least entertain the idea that in the rejection of that stereotypical 1950s suburban dad image, we threw some metaphorical babies out with the bathwater? That if today’s men modeled Ward Cleaver, America and the world would be better places? Sure, compared with current pop icons, he comes across as boring and buttoned-down. But it’s a very incomplete picture.

Of Ward Cleaver we can also say this: He’s a man who takes care of business. He doesn’t make excuses. He doesn’t whine. He doesn’t brood in defeat. He knows that his hard work and persistence will eventually win the day, if not this day. And there’s a lot he’s simply outgrown. He never had any interest in perpetuating his own adolescence. He’s a grown-up who accepts marriage and fatherhood as the life of an adult.

Now, we can quibble about his methods, but we can’t dispute that he loves his wife and kids, that they know he loves them, and that he tries to do what’s best for them—usually pretty successfully. What is not in dispute is that he’s the man of the house, that he wears that title with pride, and everyone, including his wife, likes that fact.

Ward wasn’t alone. There were lots of other iconic dads of that era: Ozzie Nelson of “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet;” Jim Anderson from “Father Knows Best;” one could argue George Bailey in the 1946 film, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” They were grown-ups who had already been through a Great Depression and, in many cases, were veterans of World War II or, later, the Korean War.

Their archetype outlasted the 1950s—Steve Douglas of “My Three Sons,” Mike Brady of “The Brady Bunch,” Howard Cunningham in “Happy Days,” and Cliff Huxtable in “The Cosby Show” (we’re talking TV characters here) shared similar traits. Like all human beings who have ever lived and whoever will live, these men had flaws. But in the end, they were solid and dependable. If you had to summarize them in one word, that word would be “responsible.”

Maybe they seem like such throwbacks now because so much of our culture has thoroughly embraced irresponsibility. But if you ask women what they really want in a man— or at least all those women who have grown out of their adolescent fascination with bad boys – they may not

say Ward Cleaver, but they'll describe most, if not all, of his traits: Reliable; trustworthy; smart; confident, but not smug. Funny and capable of laughing at himself. A man who's successful at work, but not a workaholic. A man who likes children, but is not a child himself. Perhaps most importantly, devoted to his family. It's an indisputably masculine figure. And make no mistake, that's what most women want and what all children need.

Now, I'm not saying that the Ward Cleavers of the world are off-limits to criticism or even mockery; I'm just pointing out that there was a time not that long ago when men were expected to work hard, be good husbands, neighbors and friends; to raise children and to act as role models for the next generation. Sure, laugh at them, but remember they are what our world is built on.

And here is where Ward Cleaver fits in today, where he's never gone out of style – not really: Getting married, being a father, working your way to owning a home. These are probably the best things that will ever happen to most of us. Our culture snickers at Ward Cleaver types, but it is propagating a falsehood when it paints them as stifled, miserable, hollowed-out men yearning for their carefree bachelor days and regretting their commitments. What leaves a man depressed and hollow inside is not attachments, but the lack of them.

Consider this: If all the slackers in the world disappeared tomorrow, the video game industry would collapse, but if all the Ward Cleavers of the world disappeared tomorrow, civilization would collapse.

I'm Jim Geraghty of The National Review for Prager University.