

THE FAMILY IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

A translation by Renée Neu Watkins of

I LIBRI DELLA FAMIGLIA

by Leon Battista Alberti

With an Introduction by the translator.

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decreed for us by nature, and were safe from those incursions and attacks, released from the many anxieties and concerns destined for all men, ever shrouding the heart of anyone who is not a complete fool, then I would indeed think a father more happy and blessed than other men.

I will not deny that, as you say, the father more than anyone must labor with hands and feet, with every nerve, with zeal and wisdom, for he must attempt to make his children moral and upright. Thus may they serve the advantage of the family—moral character being no less precious in a young man than wealth—and be an ornament and credit to their family, their country, and themselves. Children whose character is excellent are a proof of the diligence of their father, and an honor to him. It is generally thought better for a country, if I am not mistaken, to have virtuous and upright citizens rather than many rich and powerful ones. And surely children whose character is poor must be a terrible sorrow to any father who is not insensible and utterly foolish. Not only will the ugly and disgusting acts of the son be distasteful to him, but, as everyone knows, every errant child in many ways brings shame on his father. This only shows that everyone knows and believes it is up to the father of the family to make the young behave with honesty, restraint, and nobility. I do not believe that anyone would deny that a father can do with his sons as much as he wills to do. A good and careful trainer can make a colt gentle and obedient, while another, less alert and more neglectful, will not be able to break him. The father, too, can make his children educated and modest by the exercise of care and skill. The father of sons who do not behave well but go wild and vicious, therefore, is not without great guilt for his negligence.

Therefore, as Lorenzo was saying before, the first thought and care of the older members of the family should be to see that the youth be as rich in good qualities and moral character as possible. For the rest I would counsel the father that he should rather pursue the good of his family in dealing with his children than listen to vulgar opinion. In fact it appears that virtue almost never lacks for a welcome and a place, for it finds a place anywhere it is praised and loved. I would do, therefore, as did that Apollonius of Alabanda, a teacher of rhetoric, who, if he found that the young people in his charge did not seem to have the aptitude for eloquence, shifted them to some occupation to which they were by nature more suited. He did not let them waste their time.

It is written that those Gymnosophists, Oriental peoples respected for

their wisdom among the Indians, raised their children, not according to the will and desire of the fathers, but according to the decision and judgment of certain public sages. It was their job to observe the birth and physiognomy of everyone and to decide the extent and character of everyone's talents, and thus the parents worked according to the recommendations of these wise old men. But if a child were weak and unable to achieve anything, no one wanted to waste money and effort on his education: the sages told his parents to throw him away, and sometimes they drowned him. Thus should a father use the aptitudes of his children, in accordance with the famous oracle of Apollo which gave to Cicero the reply, "With labor and industry, follow where nature and your own genius call you." If the children are ready to develop a noble character, to perform manly deeds, to study the higher sciences and arts, to pursue military victory and glory, let them take up these things. Let them train themselves and learn. Let someone make an effort to accustom them to such things from an early age. Whatever practice is taught to children, they grow up with. If perhaps they lack the capacity, the intelligence, the strength, and the health to undertake the more formidable things, let them be given lesser and lighter training, but always let there be set before them work that is as noble, manly, and honorable as they are able to do. If they are not talented and clever enough to do the things that win most praise, and if they are useless for anything else, let the father do like those Gymnosophists, let him drown these children in greed. Let him make them into moneygrubbers, let him kindle in them the desire not for honor and glory but for gold, riches, cash.

Adovardo: This is another of our troubles, Lionardo, we do not know for certain what career will be easiest for our offspring. We do not easily discern the good road to which nature destines them.

Lionardo: Personally I think a watchful father who really looks will discover without too much difficulty what sort of work fits his son's inclinations and what sort of achievements lie within his scope. What could be more difficult than to find those things which tend to remain most hidden, the things nature keeps covered up under the earth? Yet these, as we know, have been discovered and reached by industrious craftsmen. Who told avaricious and greedy men that down there such metals as silver and gold might be found? Who cleared the hard and obscure way for them? Who assured them that these ores contained precious metals rather than lead? There were signs, there were clues

which led men to investigate. Thus these metals came to men's attention and went into use. The industry and diligence of man was so potent a thing that now none of these very well hidden things is unknown to us.

There are also architects who want to build a well or a fountain. First they look for signs, and then they dig, but not everywhere, because it would be a waste of money to dig where there was no good, clean, and rapid stream. They apply their minds to see on the earth's surface what lies underneath, inside, hidden below ground. Where they see the terrain is bumpy, dry, and sandy they do not waste their efforts. Where they see young shoots, soft grass, and myrtle or similar plants, there they hope that their labor will not be in vain. Not without some clues do they begin to establish a structure. They build, moreover, in a way that may best suit the conditions they have been led to expect.

Let the father act in much the same way. Let him note from day to day the ways his son adopts, the desires that persist or recur in him, what he does with most zeal and what he must be persuaded to do against his will. These, in fact, will be ample and clear indications to give and even confirm a complete picture. Don't imagine that the clues to other secrets are more reliable than those contained in the behavior and physiognomy of men. Men are by nature social, willing and eager to associate together, happy among men and averse to solitude. They dislike isolation, and it makes them unhappy. You are certainly mistaken if you think that being thus disposed they give less signs and permit less certainty than other things which are not only deeply hidden but entirely without any need of human acquaintance, presence, and understanding. Nature, the best of builders, not only made man to live exposed in the midst of others, but also seems to have imposed a certain necessity on him to communicate and reveal to his fellows, by speech and other means, all his passions and feelings. Rarely does she permit a thought or deed to remain so well hidden that no other man knows it in some way.

Nature herself also seems to have bonded and incorporated in things, from the first day that they see the light, clear indications and manifest signs by which they fully declare their character. Men are able, therefore, to recognize and use them according to the uses for which they were created. In the mind and intellect of mortal man, nature has placed the seed and kindled the light of a knowledge, an insight, into the remotest, most secret reasons for the clear and present causes of things. He knows whence and for what end things were born. To this nature added a divine and marvelous capacity for distinguishing and discriminating between

what is good and what is harmful, between injurious and salutary, useful and useless. As soon as any plant appears above ground, the expert and interested observer recognizes it; and the man with less experience does so somewhat later. Surely everything is recognized before it begins to decline, is put to use before it disappears.

Likewise, I think, did nature deal with men. She did not give to children such hidden and dark ways of acting, nor to fathers such callow and inexperienced judgment that they could not, from a variety of evidence, learn the direction of their sons' interests. From the first day that a child begins to manifest some particular desire, the father notes at once what is his inclination. I remember hearing from doctors that if a baby hears you snap your fingers like this, and responds with delight and alert interest, he is showing that his temperament will be suited to manly exercises and arms. If he prefers the doggerel and the songs which people use to soothe him and put him to sleep, this shows that he is born for a life of contemplation and leisure filled with letters and science.

A diligent father learns from day to day, he thoughtfully interprets his sons' every little action, word, and gesture. It is written of the rich farmer, old Servius Oppidius, that when he saw that one of his little sons was always carrying nuts in his apron and playing with them and giving them away to various people, while the other son sat very quiet, mute and sullen, counting the nuts he received and putting them in certain cran- nies, he knew by this sign alone what sort of mind and nature each boy had. When he lay dying, therefore, he called them and said he would divide their heritage between them lest, seized by some madness, they might have cause to quarrel. And he told them how he had seen that they were of different natures, that one would be tight and avaricious and the other prodigal and wasteful. Where there was such a contrast in them of mind and manner, he did not want an opposition and contradiction of wills to arise. Since they did not have the same opinion and desire in the matter of saving and spending, he provided against the possibility of anger arising between them, lest their firm friendship and love be ruined. This, then, was a man of good, praiseworthy concern. He did what it is a father's duty to do: he was curious and careful to watch every act of his children and used every sign to assess their will and temperament. Thus he observed what each would by nature be able and ready to do.

There are many ways a father can well observe the inclinations of any child. No man, however mature and experienced, no matter how full of malice, artifice, and cunning, is able always to hide his appetites, his

desires, and the passions of his spirit. If you keep your mind and your eye on him for several days, watching his gestures, actions, and manner, you will be able to observe any vice he has, however well hidden. Plutarch mentions that a single glance Demosthenes threw at certain barbarian vases showed Arpallus all the avarice and greed that was in him. One sign, one act, one word will often reveal much to you and let you see deep into a man's spirit—this much more easily with children, of course, than with those who are older in years and in malice. Children do not know how to cover up nicely with lies or some kind of disguise.

It is my belief that it definitely shows a good mind if a child is rarely without occupation and is eager to do whatever he sees others doing. It definitely shows his good and easy temperament if he quickly quiets down and forgets an injury. Such a boy is not obstinate in his desires, but without resentment and without overcoming every will he encounters, he puts aside his wishes and gives in without obduracy. A great sign of a manly spirit in a boy is the way he responds to you quickly, showing that he is ready, eager, and ardent to appear among men. He is free of any strangeness in society or rustic shyness. For this it seems that practice and custom are very good. Thus it seems practical not to keep little boys, as some mothers do, always in a room or in a lap, but to accustom them to people and teach them there to behave with due reverence toward all. One should never leave them in solitude, to sit in feminine leisure, or let them withdraw to skulk among the girls. Plato used to reprimand his Dionysius for isolating himself too much. He said that solitude is the friend and spouse of self-will. Cato once saw a boy alone, doing nothing, and asked him what he was doing. The boy said he was talking to himself. "Watch out," Cato said, "you may find yourself talking to a bad fellow." A wise man, Cato was, who knew by experience in the wisdom of his age how the youthful mind is given to burning and corrupt desires of lust, anger, or some kind of malicious opinion or idea much more than to true and unclouded reason. He knew therefore that that young man, busily listening and responding to himself, would more easily consent to his own desires and wishes than to the demands of honor. He would easily disdain continence and the avoidance of sensuality in favor of the pleasures and delights on which his desires and expectations were fixed. By solitude and leisure combined, one becomes willful, vice-ridden, and strange. Young boys should, from the first day of life, be accustomed to life among men. There they can learn virtue rather than vice.

From early childhood they can be made virile by activities as noble and

grand as are possible for their age. They should be segregated from all feminine activities and habits. The Lacedaemonians used to make their boys go out at night among the tombs in the dark, to accustom them to fearlessness and teach them not to believe the inventions and fables of old women. They knew what no man doubts, that experience is valuable at any age, but perhaps more than at any other time especially effective in early youth. A man who was raised from childhood to pursue manly and lofty goals will find any achievement that is not really too heavy for his age, if not easy, at least not difficult. Boys should be set from the beginning, therefore, to do arduous and laborious things and to win praise and great honor by their industry and exertion.

Body and mind should be exercised. Indeed it is not easy to give enough praise to the value and necessity of all sorts of exercise. The physicians, and those who have long observed and carefully studied what is good for the human body, say that exercise preserves life, kindles heat and natural vigor, skims off waste and bad elements, strengthens every muscle and sinew. Exercise is necessary to young men, useful to old ones. The only person who should not engage in exercise is one who does not wish to lead a happy, joyous, healthy life. Socrates, that father of philosophers, often used to dance and jump, both at home and in company, Xenophon tells us. In this way he kept fit, and so he even favored for exercise activities which certainly would otherwise have been lascivious and improper. Exercise is one of those natural medicines which anyone can without danger prescribe for himself. Such medicines include sleeping and waking, eating and fasting, heat and cold, a change of air, resting and taking more or less exercise according to need. At one time, indeed, the sick used to purge and strengthen themselves by the use of diet and exercise alone. To children who are still weak on account of their babyhood and can hardly hold themselves up, much rest and long periods of inactivity are proper. When they are kept up and made overtired, they only grow weaker. When little children have reached a somewhat stronger age, however, and ever after, inactivity is most detrimental. Inactivity fills the veins with phlegm, the blood becomes watery and pale, the stomach grows delicate, the sinews lazy and the whole body slow and sleepy. The mind by too much inactivity goes sour and murky. Every power of the spirit becomes weary and inert. Exercise, on the contrary, acts for the good. The whole constitution fills with vitality, the sinews grow inured to labor, every limb is strengthened, the blood thins out, the flesh gains solidity, the mind is quick and happy.

This is not the place to explain fully how useful exercise is and how needful at every age, but above all in youth. Look at boys raised in the country with plenty of physical labor and sunshine: how much stronger and more robust they are than our own children who grow up in leisure and, as Columella put it, in the shade. Death itself could not make them more hideous. They are pallid and dried out, have shadows under their eyes, and have runny noses. They need to be put to work, both to make them stronger and to save them, by training in every manly art, from sinking into lethargy and inertia. I admire men who accustom their sons to going bareheaded and having cold feet, to staying up well into the night and to getting up before dawn, yet give them such things as their personal dignity requires and as are needed for the strengthening and growth of the body. They get their children used to hardships and make them as manly as possible. These things when they do no harm do more good than things that do neither harm nor good.

Herodotus, the ancient Greek known as the father of history, wrote that after the victory of Cambyses, king of Persia, over the Egyptians, when they gathered up the bones of the many dead tumbled together, it proved easy to sort out the Persians from the Egyptians because the skulls of the Persians fell apart at the slightest shock while those of the Egyptians would hold up under sharp blows. The reason for this, he says, is that the Persians were delicate and always kept their heads covered, while the Egyptians accustomed themselves from childhood to go bareheaded in the heat of the sun, in the rain, at night, in wind and open air. One should certainly ponder the value of this custom, for it is also said that thanks to their habits hardly any of the Persians ever got bald. Lysurgus, that wisest king of the Lacedaemonians, wanted his citizens to habituate themselves from childhood, not to easy ways but to arduous exercises, not to loitering happily in the piazza but to spending their time in the fields in agriculture and in military pursuits. How well he knew that exercise is effective training. Aren't there, even among us, some who at first were weak and inept, but who became agile and strong? Haven't some men by vigorous practice turned into excellent runners, jumpers, throwers, javelin men, archers, though they were at first in these respects completely ignorant and useless? Did not Demosthenes, the Athenian orator, have by nature a slow and halting speech, but make it fluent and supple by exercising? He filled his mouth with pebbles and declaimed in a loud voice, standing by the seashore. This kind of practice improved him so much that eventually there was no smoother speaker than he, no

one more precise and correct in his enunciation. Thus exercise is not only able to change the body, but in matters of mental skill it is also able to teach us as much as we, guided by reason and wisdom, decide to attempt.

Exercise certainly not only can turn a languid and drooping person into a fresh and vigorous one, but it can even more effectively make a bad and vice-ridden human being into an honorable and disciplined one. It can make a weak intellect powerful, and change a poor memory into a very precise and powerful one. No one can have been so spoiled and made so strange and hard that effective diligence and zeal cannot entirely transform and restore him in a matter of days. We hear of Stiphonte, a philosopher of Megara, that he was by nature inclined to drunkenness and lust, but devoting himself actively to learning and virtue he so successfully overcame almost his very nature that he became better than other men. Virgil, our divine poet, was a lover when he was young. Likewise many other great men had, as we know, some defect of character at one time. Later, however, by zealously engaging in honorable activities they reformed themselves. Metrodorus, an ancient philosopher who lived at the time of Diogenes the Cynic, achieved so much by the practice and training of his memory that he was not only able to link together things said by many different persons, but to cite their exact words in the original order and place. What about that Sidonian Antipar, who, by continual exercise and practice, was able at all times and on whatever subject was being discussed to provide hexameters, pentameters, lyrics, comedy, tragedy, and every sort of poetry, which he could quote straight away without even pondering for a moment! Thanks to the thorough exercise he had given his intellect, things were possible and even easy for him which learned men today, because they have less practice, find difficult even with time for preparation. Exercise in difficult skills did so much for these men, how can one really doubt its effectiveness in general? The Pythagoreans well understood this fact. They strengthened the memory by the use of exercise and by every evening committing to memory something they had done that day. Perhaps it would be good for children, similarly, to listen every evening to a recital of what they had learned during the day.

I recall that our own father often used to send us as messengers to various people on unnecessary errands, just to train our memory. He also often asked our opinion of different things in order to sharpen and awaken our intellect and mind. He would give high praise to the one who spoke best, and thus incite us all to contend for honor. It is good, in fact it

is a duty, for a father to test his children's minds in many ways. He should be on the watch and note their every act and gesture. Then he can encourage the good and virile sort of boy and correct the lazy and self-indulgent ones by giving them exercise that suits the situation and the need. It is said that to exercise the body immediately after a meal is harmful. To move vigorously and sometimes to tire oneself out before food is not harmful, but it is not good to exhaust oneself. To exercise the powers of mind and spirit, however, is good at any hour, in any place, and in all things. Let fathers then take up this task not as a melancholy burden but rather as a pleasure. You go hunting in the forest, you tire yourself, sweat, stay all night exposed to wind and cold, all day exposed to sun and dust, in order to see an animal run and to catch it. Is it less pleasant to watch two or more minds racing to attain excellence? Is it less useful by your worthy and excellent efforts to dress and adorn your son with manners and a good education than to come home sweaty and exhausted, carrying some wild prey? Let the father gladly teach his sons to pursue excellence and fame. Let him encourage them to compete for honor, and celebrate the victor. Let him delight in having sons who are quick and eager to merit praise and love.

Adovardo: Certainly, Lionardo, I enjoy your abundance of ideas. I like each of your counsels, indeed I thoroughly approve of this principle of exercise. I agree that we can, by exercise, eliminate vices and strengthen character. But indeed, Lionardo, I don't know how to say or express very well what I feel in my own mind. This business of being a father includes cares and labors which are neither as rare nor as light, nor as welcome and pleasurable, as you perhaps think. How shall I put it? Children grow up, and the time comes, as you say, to shape their character. Fathers are not able to do it themselves, perhaps because of the pressure of greater concerns. Their mind and spirit are occupied elsewhere. They may not leave other public and private business in order to raise and educate their sons. Thus a tutor is needed. You often are forced to hear them protesting, to see them grow pale, to watch them being beaten. Often you yourself have to beat and punish them. This may seem nothing to you, I know, if you don't know the love and pity of a father, how tender and compassionate his feelings are. The children may still turn out gluttons, scoundrels, and liars, full of vice. I don't want to set forth all our sorrows here, nor could I without grief.

Lionardo: Perhaps so that I really may believe you don't mind the length of my remarks, here you immediately offer me another theme on

which I might permit myself an even longer speech. I accept the opportunity, for at this moment I know no better way to make use of our leisure than to discuss useful things of this kind. It would please me to give you pleasure, if such is the case. If necessary, perhaps I may erase a wrong opinion from your mind.

Tell me, Adovardo, what do you think should matter most to a father, business, matters of state, trade, or the good and salvation of his children? The ancient and famous philosopher Crates used to say that he longed to climb up on the highest spot on earth and cry out to the whole world: "Oh foolish citizens, where are you rushing to—why, plunging to your ruin? You pursue your gathering of riches with so much effort, such anxious care, such a multitude of devices and infinite labor. Of those to whom you will give and leave them, do you have no care, no thought and concern?" Let concern for one's children come first. Concern for the things which we strive after because they may be useful and convenient to our children, let that come second. There is a kind of madness in doing nothing to make sure that those for whom you acquire property may deserve to possess it. It shows scant wisdom to want your children to have property to drag along and manage which they neither understand nor know how to manage. No one really thinks riches are anything but trouble and harm for one who does not know how to use and preserve them. I would hardly think well of one who gave a spirited and noble horse to a person who did not know how to ride.

Who could doubt that an army should and must carry machinery and weapons for making a siege, for walling in a host, for sustaining the attacks of the enemy, for throwing missiles, and for pursuing the fleeing enemy? But who is such a fool as not to know that an army loaded down with too many arms and too much machinery is useless? What wise person would not judge that all those things which are useful in moderation are harmful when they are present in excess? Arms in sufficiency are most useful in defending one's own safety and in attacking the enemy. If you have an excess of arms, certainly you must throw them away to win, or lose in order to keep them. Better, then, to arrive at victory without that perilous burden than, out of fear of losing, weigh yourself down. No ship, I think, is safe when overloaded with the things which help a ship to navigate safely, like oars, rigging, and sails. In all things it is true that too much is as dangerous as the right amount is useful.

It would be no small riches to leave our children if we might leave them deprived of no necessity. It certainly would be riches to leave our