

FROM QUEER TO PATERNITY:

A Gay Man's Uncharted Voyage into Co-Parenting

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WHEN HER BLUISH, SQUISHED CONE-HEAD LAY ON HER MOTHER'S thigh awaiting the final contraction, I felt a rush of air leave my body on a wail of change. From this moment, it would all be different. What had I done? I'd said yes to my young friend as we walked our dogs when she asked, "Will you knock me up?" I had always wanted to be a dad. We'd sort it out as we went along. How hard could it be? I was soon to find out.

As a gay man co-parenting a fantastic three-year-old girl with a bisexual woman fifteen years my junior, I've learned a few unexpected things and that's what I want to share here.

I want to tell you about how my understanding of women experienced a quantum shift as I witnessed with awe (and more than a little fear) the initial sacrifices of motherhood — body, sleep, identity, time, space, self — all under enormous pressure, all at once. But then what would she expect of me? How could I possibly match what this woman was doing? I want to leave you with this noble impression of myself, that I considered these questions and rose to the challenge. I don't want to let you know about the real challenge of identifying my misogyny as I failed to adequately support my child's mother. About how I heard the words, "Well, you're her mother, that's what you're *meant* to do ..." coming out of my self-proclaimed pro-feminist mouth as, in her bewildered exhaustion, she spoke about feeling unable to meet the baby's needs.

Nothing seems to throw one's personal weaknesses into relief quite like raising a child. My reactions surprised me. There is so much I'd rather not tell. Like, say, that I demonized my friend for demanding too much from me. She wanted me to support her with adult company and prepare meals so that she could eat well herself while a baby — my baby — was attached to her body 24/7, nursing every two hours for ninety minutes. But I was not willing to sacrifice my single time to babysit a grown woman. How had that become the deal? I asked myself in gay high dudgeon.

Should I admit to you the concerns I had about being the fag dad of a boy child and how different those concerns are with a daughter? I wanted to know the gender of my child in order to prepare myself. My fear informed me that a boy meant the inevitability of a time when my son would be ashamed to not have a "real man" as his father — when he would gently shun me, or worse, try to make me feel better about my lack of sporting knowledge. When I knew my daughter was on her way, my fantasies shifted to sharing musical theatre and dance. How unconsciously gender-typed were my expectations? Who knew?

I cannot truly tell you about her birth — about the energy that shifts on the planet when a soul re-enters, or about how my entire being knew in that moment that she had found her way back to me. That's too large to be trapped in ink on paper.

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Until parenthood, the queer community — my community — meant many things to me. It was a place where we shared common interests and understanding, where we came together to fight social injustice as we supported each other in our diversity. Where we helped each other live, and helped each other die. I never really noticed the absence of children, but now I do. I cannot take my baby into the bar to show her off, and my former comrades won't leave their beers. The few gay dads I have met are coupled and more conservative than the tighty-righty heteros I know.

From other gay men I experience the polite disinterest in parenting that single straight men evidence. Describe the joy of your new puppy to a cat person, you'll get the vibe. Does the queer community support my kid and me? Not much. When I carry my thirsty three-year-old over to the long line-up for drink tickets at the Queer Pride celebrations under the relentless sun

and ask some fag near the front if we can cut in so I can get my daughter some water and I'm told, "It's a long line-up for everyone!" I am angry and saddened. This does not happen at non-queer celebrations in my town.

So my sense of "community" has shifted to mean the place in which I make my home, wherein my child and I are supported. The folks who inhabit the village in which I live seem to believe that kids (a) exist, (b) are welcomed, if not then at least tolerated, and (c) are looked out for. The (straight) staff at the local coffee shop excel in remembering (much to her delight) that my little girl likes her hot chocolate with coloured sprinkles *and* marshmallows. The (hetero) librarians recommend books she might particularly enjoy. The (mainstream) checkout staff at the Valu-Mart take time to reassure her that the scary goblins are not allowed to shop there. Straight people, formerly my oppressors, are now taking care of her, me, us.

In return, I offer my newly embraced geographic community my portable activism. The provision of only two highchairs at the local coffee shop is simply unacceptable, as my indignant email campaign pointed out. Are we supposed to risk our children's safety as we pass hot coffee over their tiny heads? We won. Six chairs now.

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It was difficult getting support from the local "Dykes and Tykes" group — who bestow upon me honorary membership — as the women laughingly dismiss the donors. And they seem not to want to hear about how thrilled I am that my daughter looks so much like me. I understand that lesbian-parenting dynamics are complex. I get that non-biological mums can feel threatened in various ways. So unlike families where Heather has a mommy and a daddy, and both parents enjoy identifying possible genetic markers, I recognize that implicit in the statement, "She gets that from me," is the corollary "There is nothing we can identify of yours." Nonetheless, I am left with a desire to celebrate the similarities I share with my girl.

Are you curious about the struggle I see written on the faces of those who aren't sure if they can ask about my daughter's conception? What are the boundaries? Where are the lines? For those too shy to ask, the answer is: cheesy porn and a veterinary syringe.

Can I tell you about my heightened awareness of gender oppression as

my daughter is invariably assumed to be my son (why else would a father show so much interest)? About how men will be aggressive with my “son” by lifting her onto the train without asking me if it is okay? About how well-intentioned women with no gender analysis tell her how “pretty” she is and that she is a “princess,” and about how difficult it is to fight such insidious forms of oppression? About how the best defence is to remind her she is “strong like bull” and ask her to haul wood in for the fireplace with me, then ask if she wants us to wear our sarongs and be Wonder Woman together.

I want to share with you my outrage (and oh-so-secret delight) as I am awarded approving smiles, nods, and support from women for simply being with my child — and the contrasting critical response experienced by her mother of whom is demanded on a sunny day, “Where’s her hat?”

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Are you interested in the inability of men (or is it mere reluctance) to talk about parenting with each other? As I glance across the street to acknowledge another male parent I learn that straight men avoid eye contact with each other when they are walking stroller-bound kids to the park. They are engaged in the “too-cool-for-this-activity” one-handed stroller push. (If you haven’t noticed this, check it out next time you’re walking down the sidewalk. Women use two hands on the stroller handle, manly men position themselves off to the side as though the stroller isn’t theirs and push with one casual hand. God only knows how they manage to steer.) These same gender-bound dads refuse to shout “Whee!” when pushing their infants on the swings, despite heartfelt pleas. I am saddened that their macho programming doesn’t allow for the joy of engaging whole-heartedly with their babies and sharing that pleasure with other men. Can these really be the folks that are *privileged* by the patriarchy?

With whom, then, can I share my delight in opening to the inherent joy my kid accesses, and demands of me! With whom can I share my fears as I continue my personal therapeutic work, memories evoked unbidden as my first response to her “No!” is to seek to dominate her will by force of my own. At whose knee was that learned? What is required of me to truly nurture her, providing the safe container for her cosmological exploration? So far it seems to involve revisiting and acknowledging those long-buried places of pain, and repaginating my narrative as new chapters are inserted.

I had not anticipated that my shift in identity from out-loud-and-proud queer activist to queer parent would temper my willingness to expose myself to hatred that now implicates my daughter. Will I appear on the local CBC Radio show to talk about “The Issue” of queer parenting? No. My daughter is not an “Issue” in the way my lived experience of sexual oppression has been. Am I available for local TV programming to feature diverse families? No. I will not risk my child being identified as “that kid with the fag dad.” Am I ambivalent about these decisions? Do I have parts of me screaming about selling out, the importance of activism, and working for change? Oh yes.

And now my closest friend, the only other person in the world who delights in my child as I do, is her mother. Together we share our observations and challenges, frustrations and delights as we break a trail through the complexities of heteronormative expectations. Just as being queer in the world invites the journey from self-criticism to social critique, so, too, does queer parenting invite social evolution in the simple, unapologetic joy of the endeavour.

I have come to realize that there was a place in my heart that was waiting for my daughter. My evolving love for her requires that I see her for the Divine Gift that she manifests. As I do so, it becomes necessary for me to find the courage to claim my own spiritual truth so as not to disallow hers. Karma chameleon.

For she sees me, you see. She invests me with a love and a trust I have never known. And I am learning to trust and love her visionary investment.

What does it mean to be the person whose arms *will* be there when she jumps unannounced?

It means I'm her dad.