

Introduction: When You Comin' Home, Dad?

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It was a Sunday night and my daughter, Rebecca, and I were heading north on the Merritt Parkway, through Connecticut, back home to Massachusetts, after a weekend of visiting friends and family in and around New York City. On the radio a father was singing a lament about having missed his son's childhood—you know the song.

Rebecca was eight at the time, and I was in the middle of two years of teaching as a visiting professor in the English Department at the University at Albany, some hundred and forty miles from where we lived—a five-hour commute, round trip (though for the most part I had to do it only twice a week). Any time I told people where I was teaching and where I lived, they asked if—or sometimes simply assumed that—I was living in Albany half the week. It was a question that always irritated me. Would they make the same assumption about a *mother* with a young daughter?

I'd turned the song up and told Rebecca to listen to it closely. When it was over, I asked her what she thought it was about.

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“That the father is sad he didn’t see his son grow up?” Rebecca asked, only a little tentatively.

“That’s right,” I told her, proud, like any parent, that my daughter could intelligently analyze and answer questions—even if I was the only one there to hear what she had to say.

Rebecca paused.

Then she said, “That’s why you don’t have an apartment in Albany, right? Because you don’t want to be like the man in the song.”

“That’s right,” I said again, working on keeping the emotion out of my voice, concentrating on the road ahead of me.

“I’m glad,” Rebecca said.

“Me too.”

“Did you get the idea from the song?” she asked me.

“No,” I told her.

That my daughter is good at analyzing song lyrics and other texts, that she was good at this from a very young age, makes sense: I teach writing; my wife teaches Spanish language, literature, and film; many of our friends and family members on both sides are academics as well. That she would be particularly keyed in to what amount to issues of parenting, gender, and division of domestic labor makes sense too.

I’ve been talking, writing, and not uncharacteristically complaining about these issues since before my daughter’s birth, in 1995—back into my own childhood, really, but I’ll get to that.

It also makes sense that we were having that conversation in the car; that’s where a good deal of modern-day parent-child relating takes place. And, from the time Rebecca was weaned, at eighteen months, while I was in the midst of a couple of years of being the stay-at-home parent and my wife was working days, nights, weekends, and holidays—doing whatever was necessary to earn her tenure—my daughter and I also regularly drove that route to and from New York City; these topics came up more often than one might think they would.

When Rebecca was three and a half—with the pro bono assistance of Deborah Ellis, a professor of law at New York University and former legal counsel for the National Organization for Women’s Legal Defense Fund¹—I got the Mobil Oil Corporation to comply with state law

in Connecticut and in New York State and install changing tables in the men's rooms in the rest stops along Route 15, which encompasses the Wilbur Cross, the Merritt, and the Hutchinson River parkways. It's worth noting that federal law offers no cause of action in such a situation. Achieving gender equity in college athletics is a federal matter—with which I have no quarrel. Whether fathers can change their children's diapers indoors while traveling, however, is a “state's rights” matter with which the federal government chooses not to trifle.

For months afterward, any time I took Rebecca into a men's bathroom, she would look around and then ask me, “Are you going to make them put a changing table in here too?”

I would if I could, and I know I'm not alone in holding that view.

Professor Ellis had a running start in taking on Mobil on my behalf: A few years earlier, her husband, also an attorney, had taken similar action against the Lord & Taylor department store chain for its failure to have changing tables in men's rooms.

He won too.

It may be that the tide is beginning to turn in terms of how we see fathers and how fathers see themselves, in how we talk about parenting, and in how we represent parents in the media, in popular art, in everyday language.

As far as I'm concerned, those changes can't come fast enough; I've been waiting for them almost all of my life.

You Say You Want a Revolution?

Well, Y' Know . . .

The gender messages being broadcast in the 1970s, when I was an adolescent, were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the feminist movement was a force to be reckoned with. Women and men who wanted change—both full civil and economic rights for women and a more comprehensive fracturing of gender roles overall—were visible, vocal, and, in many ways, ascendant. The Equal Rights Amendment was working its way through state legislatures; many people thought it was on its inevitable way to ratification.

As a teenage boy who did babysitting in addition to mowing lawns and washing cars, these issues were directly relevant to me, not simply matters of intellectual interest. It was hard not to wonder exactly what was going on.

There were people happy to see a boy taking care of children. Still, when I was the male voice on the phone, *claiming* to be the babysitter, I seemed to panic the occasional grandparent or friend of the family when they called: Now and then, I was quizzed on difficult questions like the child's name—as if I might have been a slightly dim home invader who had yet to learn that it was poor form to pick up the phone mid-rampage.

My family circumstances also made these issues more concrete than abstract. My mother was a Zionist socialist who left New York City for Israel on graduating high school, shortly after the declaration of statehood. In part, she said in later years, she was looking for a living arrangement that dispensed with a good deal of the traditional, gendered division of labor. A few years of living on a kibbutz—I picture her, more or less self-described, making a huge cauldron of soup, stirring it with a canoe paddle—convinced her that Israel was not to be the home of this then-radical alternative. She returned to New York and took a job as a public health nurse.

My grandmother and my aunt on my father's side of the family were also both strong and crucial presences for me: women with as much intellectual and philosophical force to them as emotional intensity.

My parents divorced when I was in my early teens, and my younger sister and I stayed with my father. I remember the theory that we were each to make dinner two nights per week; I don't remember clearly how cleaning chores were divided up—although I have some dim memory of charts. This system did not work smoothly or easily, but I don't believe we were undernourished. And—if the house was somewhat dingy, and at times in disarray—I don't recall filth at the level of health hazard. No one was ever hired to come in and cook or clean during that period of time, so we must have somehow done it ourselves, with my father actively participating, as well as playing the crucial supervisory role.

In the larger society, during the same period, while there was some intense cultural and political battling going on—backlash even then, early and fierce—there was also genuine and growing support for women to take on “nontraditional” work roles, which at that time still meant almost any role outside of secretarial work, teaching in elementary school, or nursing.

On the broader domestic front, both images and realities were beginning to change as well—in part as a result of increased workforce participation on the part of women. Popular culture began to provide intermittent glimpses of men doing housework, cooking, and taking care of children, like an analogue broadcast television station at the edge of the signal, flickering through the interference. But those changes—it seemed to me then and I’ve found no reason to change my view in retrospect—were *at least* as controversial as women moving into the workplace in increasing numbers, if not more so.

John Irving’s novel *The World According to Garp* came out in 1978, when I was in high school. The title character was a writer, a stay-at-home father, and a great cook. Sounded cool to me. But to a lot of people *Garp* seemed to be more wacky than admirable, more literary magic than realistic option.

John Lennon was holed up in the Dakota, on Manhattan’s Upper West Side—a few blocks from where my mother lived—having essentially given up making music to bake bread and take care of his son Sean. Some people saw this as a positive model; I certainly did. But others interpreted the way that he was living his life as just another way in which he had been emasculated by Yoko Ono—ugly strains of misogyny and racism (she was a Dragon Lady, in this view, who first broke up the Beatles and then broke John’s spirit). How else to explain his choice to care for his son rather than continue his career? How else to explain the famous photo of Yoko, lying down, clothed in black, John curled against her, naked and fetal?

On television, there were commercials that depicted men engaged in domestic labor. But I am hard pressed to remember any that showed this in an unalloyed, positive light. For the most part, in my memory,

these commercials boil down to a set-piece exchange that is only slightly exaggerated.

OPEN ON:

Wide shot. Suburban household. Day. An inept father is standing in the kitchen, the sink piled high with dirty dishes, something burning on the stove, a two-foot dike of detergent foam leading the way to the clothes washer, around the corner, in the laundry room.

Father (*yelling to his wife, offscreen*): Honey, is it all right if I dry the kids in the microwave?

CUT TO:

Close up. Suburban household. Day. Wife's face as she surveys the mess from the kitchen doorway. A mixture of amusement and disdain at his incompetence clouds her features before she moves in to displace him and restore order.

Popular culture critic Mark Crispin Miller has dubbed these sorts of scenarios examples of “pseudo-feminism.”² A focus on male domestic incompetence gives a surface appearance of recognizing the power and authority of women. But one doesn't have to read too deeply into the subtext to see that the message is neither liberatory nor egalitarian.

What conclusion could one draw from such a scene, other than that it would be sheer madness to “allow” men to continue to contribute to—to *take over!*—cooking, cleaning, or child care? It implies a willingness on the part of men to do such work but quickly demonstrates that we are simply not up to the task.

We bow to your superior skills . . . Now back to the kitchen, Honey.

What much of this suggests is that I *shouldn't* have been so quick to dismiss Rebecca's question about whether or not my behavior was cued or shaped by the song on the car radio. It's a song I grew up listening to; I remember, as well, the point in my childhood when part

of the chorus of Pete Seeger’s “Hammer Song” morphed from “all of my brothers” to “my brothers and my sisters,” a change I found jarring—change isn’t always smooth and even radical kids can evince a kind of “that’s-not-how-I-learned-this” conservatism—but came to like. And of course—in addition to family, economics, politics, and a whole knot of other influences—books, movies, music, advertising, television, language, American culture both high and low, *did* do a lot to shape my ideas about what kind of parent a man should or could be.

How could they not have?

Where Are We Now?

I am writing neither as a social scientist nor as a demographer. It is not that I completely reject the descriptive power of numbers: A hydrogen atom consists of a single electron orbiting a single proton; that’s not a matter up for discussion. But in describing social, cultural, or political trends, I believe numbers have limited utility.

They also have close to unlimited plasticity. More often than not, in examining social trends of any complexity, any good statistician can make the numbers dance. Statistics don’t even stand still when we analyze them in retrospect.

In looking to generate statistics about domestic labor, moreover, how do we take measurements, and whose metrics do we find credible? Most of our information comes from survey data and from interviews. When a man says that he is doing X hours of labor taking care of his children on a weekly basis, what do we do when his wife says that he is actually doing ten hours less?

What *counts* as labor in this area? If a man says he took his kids to the park for three hours, giving his wife “time off,” what do we do with her contention “Sure, he took them—after I spent an hour getting them ready, couldn’t work while they were gone because I worried about him not being careful enough on the playground, and then spent another hour cleaning them up and settling them down once he brought them home!”

Are they both credited with three hours of child care in that situation?

Can she sustain a claim that this was actually five hours of child care on her part, compared to his three? Depends on what you believe, on who spins the story and how.

If I were simply to report the number of hours above in one configuration or another—three for him and none for her; three for him and five for her—that might give the appearance of good, quantitative solidity. But those numbers would do more to *hide* the truth than to reveal it. We learn more if we see the whole vignette: what happened, how the husband described it, how the wife described it—how the children saw the situation, if they were old enough to comment meaningfully.³

I am more interested, in the pages that follow, in narrative, in both weaving and examining the threads in credible *stories*, than I am in statistics. What we believe to be true, the personal—and cultural, and national—narratives to which we subscribe are powerful shapers of day-to-day reality.

My intention is for this book to act as a clarifying lens, focused on both American families (our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers) and on American culture (our language, our movies, our television programs, our advertising). My belief is that the landscape of the past few decades reveals, at bare minimum, the beginning of real change in how we take care of our children, in how we structure our households, in how we divide up domestic labor.⁴ My hope is that exploring these issues and images will spark both recognition in readers and additional change in this direction.

When we examine change, of necessity, we look at why things often *don't* change, as well. I am particularly interested in the not uncommon resistance to the notion that much of anything has meaningfully changed around the quantity and the quality of the time American fathers spend with their children. Ironically, I see this resistance coming from both the right and the left.

Resistance on the right is easier to explain philosophically. Both men and women in more politically or culturally conservative families

are apt to have a traditional view of gender: men are the breadwinners; women stay home and take care of the children.

To publicly *admit* to sharing domestic labor would amount to an admission of emasculation on two counts for the husband: for his failure to earn sufficient money “as he should” to permit his wife to stay home with the children and for his own taking up of “women’s work.” For the wife, it would amount to a public admission of *her* failure to take care of home and children “as she should” and her inappropriate usurpation of the prerogatives of the “proper head of the household.”

Women work outside the home. That’s no less true in conservative families than in progressive families. The economic pressures are the same; the economic lifeline—a second salary—is the same.

What *is* often different is what happens with child care and, of particular importance to what I am arguing, how this matter is discussed publicly. We have a national ambivalence about preschool day care, but this is closer to hardcore resistance in blue-collar or lower-middle-class conservative households. Day care, entrusting one’s children to strangers—the financial costs aside—is more often viewed by such families as a shamefully unacceptable betrayal of family values and a potential venue for exposing children to a variety of dangers, both cultural and physical.⁵

As a result, evidence shows a large and vastly underreported increase in the number of conservative households in which men and women are sharing parenting to some degree, as a matter of necessity, both real and perceived. Most often this is true in families where both parents do shift work: nurses, utility workers,⁶ police officers, firefighters.⁷

On the left, I believe there is resistance to acknowledging progress, in part, for fear that doing so will blunt the drive for further and more comprehensive change. I understand that concern; it is not my contention that we have reached some sort of postgender, egalitarian Promised Land where all are “Free to Be You and Me,”⁸ but it is simply counterfactual to claim that we have not made substantial progress toward equality, along a variety of axes, in the past thirty-five years or so.

This resistance, which I would characterize as essentially tactical, is buttressed by an emotional reaction—on the part of at least some women and men of egalitarian bent—that might be summed up as follows:

“You want me to listen to *men’s* problems and complaints now? *Pub-lease!*”⁹

In Chapter 6, for example, as part of an examination of the cultural impact of the 1979 movie *Kramer vs. Kramer*, I cite *New York Times* film critic Molly Haskell. Writing three years after the movie’s release, she is both irritated by and dismissive of the movie in significant part because of this perceived inequity. “The supreme irony of *Kramer vs. Kramer*,” she fumes, “was that here at last was a film that took on the crisis central to the modern woman’s life, that is, the three-ring circus of having to hold down a job, bring up a child and manage a house simultaneously, and who gets the role? Dustin Hoffman.”¹⁰

I understand the emotion; I understand its basis. But I don’t believe that what she wrote was “useful,” either to fathers or to mothers.

A medical analogy might help illuminate this.

In the 1980s, AIDS activists began to reshape medical care, from the drug testing and approval process, to hospital visiting regulations, to end-of-life care. AIDS was then almost exclusively a terminal illness; the patients were, as a group, younger than most other people in that situation, sometimes radical to begin with, sometimes radicalized by their experience with the illness; they fought to change the terms of their treatment and the terms of their deaths.

Some cancer patients and their families resented the changes the AIDS patients and their allies were able to initiate. *Why should they get privileged access to drugs still in clinical trials? Why should they have liberalized visiting policies? What gives them the right to challenge their physicians when the culture of medical care says we can’t challenge ours?*

Some of those complaints—not often voiced publicly—were doubtless colored by homophobia. But they embody an obvious and powerful emotional logic untainted by that consideration: *I’m dying too! Don’t I deserve the same attention?*

Ultimately, that's the narrative that won out, not a competition, not a zero-sum game in which the gains of one set of patients were construed to be the losses of another: The AIDS patients' rights movement birthed a *broader* patients' rights movement, rather than remaining at the level of "sectarian warfare" between patients suffering from different illnesses.¹¹

Attention to the issues around fathers—married or divorced; custodial or noncustodial; working as primary parents, sharing child care, or working outside the home—should not be taken to be competition for attention to the issues faced by mothers. Indeed, while there may be some short-term, emotional benefit to guarding the territory of child care as a "women's issue," doing so also contributes to the ongoing marginalization of what I would instead call "parents' issues" in our political discourse.¹²

I understand Haskell's irritation. She brings up an issue, and an irony, that bears discussion. To launch that discussion as a public attack, however, amounts to parents arranging themselves in a circular firing squad.

Sometimes gender matters. Sometimes mothers and fathers have different concerns in terms of what makes our home lives or our professional lives either easier or more difficult (men don't get pregnant, for example). More often, however, our concerns overlap: We are more powerful when we stand together as parents than when we set ourselves up as fathers against mothers or vice versa.

So where are we now?

We may be on the cusp of fundamentally—and to my mind positively—shifting to a much more open definition of family and caregiving generally, opening up and broadening what it is possible, or perhaps more accurately what it is *acceptable*, for a man to do with his life. A shorthand way of looking at this would be that in the next decade we may see the home open up to men in the same way that the workplace began to open up to women in the 1970s. I believe this would be good for men, for women, for children, though I would never assume that change is always easy or that it is ever neat.

On the other hand . . .

Perhaps instead we will see the reestablishment of much more rigid traditional gender roles: Men go out into the world to work; women tend home, hearth, and children.

In the pages that follow, I tell the story of American families in broad strokes and of a handful of fathers in some detail, of where we are and how we got here. I do this in two ways: by looking at families in which the father is either a stay-at-home parent or a co-parent and by examining how our image of (and as) fathers has changed over the past thirty-five years or so, the kind of language we use around parenting, the way we see fathers represented in movies, on television, in advertising.

Of the five families I profile, I have or had some connection to three of them: one is the family of one of my oldest and closest friends; two are families I met because they had children in the school my daughter attended from kindergarten through sixth grade.

I chose them because they represent a range of situations and motivations: how and why they have divided up child care is different from family to family; they live in different parts of the country; they are a reasonably ethnically diverse group of families. There were more than a dozen other families I considered but rejected.

I sought out the families whose stories bracket the book, at the beginning and at the end, because, in both cases, their situations were evocative of groundbreaking changes: the first because Ángel Nieto was a stay-at-home father in the 1970s, when this was an exceedingly rare role—and the fact of his son-in-law following in his footsteps is an interesting additional development; the last because the child-care-related gender discrimination case of former Maryland state trooper Kevin Knussman, in the 1990s, made news all the way up to the White House. The Knussmans, moreover, a religious family with strong conservative beliefs, also do something to illustrate the demographic in which I believe growth in shared care both has been underreported in the past and may provide a surprising source of change in the future.

Where possible, I interviewed the children as well as the adults. The impact that the changes regarding *who does what*—at home in

general and with kids in specific—have on the “objects of our attention” and affection is key.

As to the cultural artifacts I have chosen to analyze—the movies, television programs, and advertisements—they are meaningful to *me*; I make here no grand claims about their absolute and irrefutable meaning or their statistical significance. I do believe, however, that viewed in context, these changing images of fathers and families both concretize and give more texture and color to evolving social trends than would a few pages of dry, quantitative analysis backed by “solid” numbers.

The *Ideal* Family?

If America is an ocean liner, we can think of families as individual cabins. It’s not really my business what goes on in the other cabins, for the most part. We set the bar fairly high for the point at which the other families begin first knocking on and then, if necessary, knocking down your cabin door.

If it seems pretty clear that someone’s getting hurt in there, we’re coming in; that’s a moral imperative. And if something going on in there seriously impacts the rest of us, that’s going to bring us in as well. Your kids can’t bore holes in the hull.

I don’t care if it’s a science project; my feet are getting wet and the buffet is beginning to list to starboard!

So, for starters, from my point of view, the members of the ideal family aren’t hurting each other, and they aren’t hurting the larger society. The ideal family is *functional*. For the most part, if it works, it’s fine by me.

I’m not arguing for absolute parity in domestic labor. I’m not arguing for the superiority of “at home” parenting, however divided or configured, versus paid child care. I have something of a bias in favor of “more is better” when it comes to the number of adults, of whatever ages or genders, in the parental role, but I know plenty of loving and effective single parents—my own father among them, for a chunk of my childhood.

What I *am* arguing for more than anything is a greater openness to choice. I believe this would have a positive effect on parents, on children, on families. I would like to see this greater openness in society at large, within families, on the part of individuals.

Of course, one of the minefields one has to cross, in any discussion of gender roles, is the Nature-versus-Nurture debate. Here's where I stand:

It was clear as soon as our daughter was old enough to navigate the playground that I was willing to allow her to take greater physical risks than was my wife. Children periodically fall down, and I don't think that's always bad. In many ways, it's an important learning tool, far more effective than any safety lecture that I could give.

I wasn't being callous or indifferent when I gave Rebecca a bit more freedom. I didn't walk away from her when she was attempting something new and difficult, but when she was a toddler on the playground my hand was more likely to be six inches away from her; my wife more often remained in direct contact.

I've never felt that we had any meaningful philosophical difference there. I don't complain that my wife is smothering Rebecca; my wife doesn't accuse me of neglect. But our "emotional approach" is clearly slightly different, and that shapes who we are as parents. Go to almost any playground in America, and that's a statistically significant split, most often along gender lines.

One response is to ascribe this split to nurture rather than nature, an artifact of culture, a characteristic we can change—or that we're more confident about being able to change than we would be if we thought these tendencies were "wired," inborn gender differences.

I don't have the larger answer. Again, what I want to advocate for instead is respect for personal choice and individual difference. That doesn't resolve the larger question, but it isn't clear to me that the larger question *can* ultimately be resolved.

If geneticists find a variety of genes that they have been hunting for some time now—the genius gene, the criminal gene, the gay gene, the mothering gene, the super-athlete gene, the warrior gene—will

this really put a smooth end to a variety of ideological and sociological debates that have been roiling societies for generations?

It seems unlikely.

We do better to look at actions in context and judge them apart from labels, to look at what is being done, rather than who is doing it. In observing a parent on a playground, then, the question becomes not “Is that child being maternally smothered or paternally neglected?” but rather “Does the level of attention being accorded the child fall within what we might describe as ‘reasonable parenting practice?’”

Is that person taking care of the child?

Not a perfect solution.

It loses some of the warmth and specificity of either “maternal” or “paternal,” has a slight tinge of the language of Socialist Realist theater to it:

Observe that Comrade Don is well within reasonable parenting practice in his attention to his child. Our congratulations, Comrade Don!

But it should be pointed out that this is essentially what women have been fighting for in the professional sphere for forty years or more: Judge me on how I do my job, not on whether or not I’m “a pretty good manager *for a woman.*”

It is inevitable that our solutions will always be less than perfect. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t keep pursuing improvement.

as “women’s ways of being and ways of knowing,” a greater male presence in child care requires a reciprocal process.

What it means to be a man is beginning to open up in the same way that *what it means to be a woman* has opened up. Both of those changes, that destabilization of roles, scare and outrage some people. Having the clarity of “the right way to do things” replaced by a dizzying menu of options can be confusing, but freedom is a good problem to have.

The more of us taking care of our children, the better.