

Fatherhood

Being a father seemed unnatural to me. You have to realize, I'm halfway through my eighties and the world was different back when I was fertile. Kay and I had seven years together before our daughter Nola came along. By then, I suppose it goes without saying that we had ceased using birth control. Secretly – as she tends to do things – Kay visited a reproductive specialist. The secretive method for determining the fertility of the male partner in such cases is... well... you can only imagine... a test that can be performed without his express consent. I'll spare you the details. I was a little put out when I found out about it. Receiving the news that I'd passed my impromptu exam ameliorated my reaction considerably. And when Kay eventually came down with an undeniable case of pregnancy, we were both elated at her discomfort.

The occasion of the nativity scene was awful! It was Christmas time with Nola due on that very day, and for some reason it had been decided, with me as a disenfranchised voter, that we would host Kay's extended family for Christmas dinner—all the guests staying for days surrounding it, in our modest two-bedroom farmhouse. In addition to Kay's parents, there would be her brother, sister, their spouses, and two kids. That's not all—my brother-in-law would bring his widowed mother. They would all be spending three days in our two-bedroom shack. So I asked my brother-in-law if he could bring their camper up to provide more sleeping room. Apparently, that act of inhospitality made him mad. He did not return to our house for another twenty years.

So, anyway, with a living room full of sleeping bodies, Kay eagerly packed her bag to go to the hospital to have the baby 'induced' the day after Christmas. This procedure was required because Kay's doctor would be leaving town after Christmas—when Nola had been expected—she was already a day late. Kay was joyously happy with everything, including the excited houseful of commotion, but I was fit to be tied.

We got to the hospital, and they began a drip for the induction. Eventually labor pains started, and I began doing what I'd been informed any good husband would do—watching the clock, counting the seconds between the pains, advising on proper breathing techniques, etc. Out of the blue, Kay said, in a voice that suggested there was no alternative: "Go and get my mother!" So that was the nativity scene from which I was excluded.

So, I'm back out in the waiting room, where I pick up a magazine—probably *Life*. Nervously, I thumbed through it until I found the article by Clare Booth Luce, about one of her plays: *The Women, Slam the Door Softly*, about how under-appreciated and exploited women are. Those were concepts that hadn't ever seemed to have entered my mind, but I began reading. Thus, even as our daughter was being born, I was being educated to the kind of woman she would become, and how that woman would deserve to be treated.

Admittedly, I was a bit vulnerable at the time, but the experience was an epiphany. I realized that my head had been up my ass my whole life. I should have been aware of the logical arguments Luce made, but I wasn't. It's not like I made a miraculous recovery from my male chauvinistic behavior mind you, but at least in my mind I had cleared a hurdle. It was a high one from my perspective. And all this had occurred while my wife and mother-in-law were in there having my baby.

When they finally wheeled Kay out of the delivery room, where they assist the babies in popping out of their mothers, Kay's eyes were whirling around in circles. I noticed her bathrobe had sunk into what looked to be a major crater in her stomach area; she was exclaiming incoherently that she wanted to see her baby. She told me later that that was what she had been going on about, but no one could have understood that. Then my otherwise charming mother-in-law had the chutzpah to suggest that our beautiful, but bald, baby girl looked ever so much like my aging bald-headed brother-in-law. I was in no mood for such frivolity.

I was in my late twenties with a rigid lifestyle and behavior pattern, all of which required change. Needless to say, I never had maternal instincts, and quite frankly, the diaper changing procedure was nothing short of nauseating. I think Nola was a good baby compared to anything I could compare her to, but not an easy adjustment for a guy who had not had to face such issues before.

By the time our son came along, Kay was in the middle of becoming an award-winning trainer of racehorses. Our son's birth occurred when horse training was beginning in mid-February. There had been minor difficulties that complicated Kay's recovery, so I had to take a half-time leave of absence from my engineering job. During this little 'sabbatical' I was assigned to a project at a facility that was sixty miles from our farm. The racetrack, where I spent mornings performing training duties per Kay's instructions, was located halfway between. There was a major gas crisis in the U.S. in mid-seventies, and one evening, I ran out of gas on my way home from my engineering job. There was no—as in not a single—gas station open; they were all out of gas. Kay had to bring me gas from our tank at the farm.

Of course Sean was a rambunctious boy unlike our first shot at parenthood. He scribbled with crayons in my math books, was in our bed with us whenever he could manage it—all arms and legs and heavy to carry back to his bed. He jumped off anything, anytime, breaking his foot on one occasion, his collar bone on another. Ultimately, he would become an outstanding athlete—particularly in football. When Nola came back for a weekend during her first quarter at the university, Sean bragged that he had taught me the 'F' word. He hadn't taught me the word, of course. He frequently provided the context for using it, so he may have thought he had.

My expectation of fatherhood had been that once they learned my language, we would be able to discuss things rationally. That was a mistake. I suspect the failure to communicate was as much my problem as theirs. But we cohabited amicably, Kay occasionally having to translate. They grew up to be amazing adults of whom I am justifiably proud. We can finally talk as peers about our respective successes and failures in our roles as parents.

Some time ago Nola told me that her brother, Sean had asked whether they should expect an end-of-life conversation with their dad. We laughed. We both know that won't ever happen. But more recently Sean asked me why he'd never seen me cry. I told him, "I don't know to tell you the truth. I've just been lucky, I guess."