



Stepmothering

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Robert often reminds me that I am not his mother. I put on his coat and give him a small hug. "You are not my mother." I spend the afternoon cooking spaghetti sauce which Dennis, his father, says is Robert's favorite meal. When dinner is served, Robert announces, "My mom doesn't make me eat this stuff." I persist in my efforts to say that I care and suggest that I read a story. Robert agrees; he loves stories. He sits rigid next to me taking care that none of him touches any of me. He giggles as my voice changes for Growly Bear and I am encouraged. As the story nears the end, he has moved perceptibly closer. The moment is broken by his quip, "My mom reads more better stories. I love my mom. You are not my mother."

It is true; I am not mother; I am *step*mother. But how am I to be a stepmother? What is a stepmother anyway? If I try hard, will I be a good stepmother? I am a good mother to my own children. Can that be the basis for learning how to be a good stepmother? What is the experience of stepmothering?

270

Certainly I did not have a choice in becoming a stepmother; that is, I chose the children's father, but I did not choose the children in the same way, and that makes becoming a stepmother a very different experience from becoming a natural mother or an adoptive mother. As Adrienne Rich (1976, p. xiv) says, "Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth." The adoptive parent, too, has a ritual to fulfill before she comes face to face with the chosen child. There is the process of deciding to adopt, the series of interviews, exploring the questions of sex, age, physical characteristics, sometimes even family history, and finally the actual act of going to meet and receive the child. Stepmothers just *are*—there are no rituals, no intense physical and psychic preparatory rites—no choice. We meet our stepchildren most often without plans or celebration before we know them to be stepchildren, during our courtship, before our marriage to their father, when they are still clearly some other woman's children. Even if the first time we see his children is an orchestrated moment, it is most often not we who have choreographed the event but their father, or the other woman, if she is alive, or even the children themselves.

The word "stepmother" is derived from the Old English word *steop* meaning bereaved, orphaned, or deprived. It takes its meaning from

the fact that, in early history, women became stepmothers because the children's natural mother had died and their father married again. Myths and legends, especially those of the Brothers Grimm, portray stepmothers as cruel and wicked, and these myths have persisted to the point where "stepmotherly" is defined as being harsh or neglectful and a stepchild is defined as being one who fails to receive proper care and attention.

Yesterday's stepmothers understood themselves to be almost entirely responsible for those things which are expected of a mother. Not so today! As eleven-year-old David said, "She better not try to act like my real mother."

David, like many other stepchildren, lives with his mother and visits his dad and stepmother, sometimes every weekend, sometimes only during holidays, and sometimes only when he feels like it or when dad and stepmother feel like having him. Other stepmothers see their stepchildren a few days each week especially if the children's father and mother have joint custody. Some stepchildren live with their stepmothers and visit their mothers. In any case, the majority of today's stepmothers are not stepmothers due to the death of the children's mother, but rather because the natural parents are divorced. Like me, these stepmothers ask themselves repeatedly the questions which began this study.

And Because She Was a Wicked Stepmother

I am a weekend stepmother and whenever I wait for Dennis to bring his children, Robert and James, to our house for the weekend, I imagine myself to be a "good" stepmother. Yet my images are mostly reminders of what I should try to avoid, of the mistakes I should not make, or of what I will not be. I will not be the stepmother of Hansel and Gretel and ask Dennis to leave the children. I will not inflict on them the plight of Cinderella who suffered her stepmother's favoritism for her own daughters. I will not be deQuincy's "stony-hearted" stepmother, nor will I be like the "merciless" stepmother described by Plutarch. While all my understandings gleaned from fairy tales provide insight into what I won't do, I am no closer to knowing how to be a good stepmother. Yet I, like other stepmothers, must try.

The notion of trying recurs frequently in talks with other stepmothers.¹ They say:

"I have tried to love them."

"I should have tried harder."

"I have tried to be a good stepmother."

What is it that stepmothers mean when they claim to have tried? The idea of trying is a reflexive notion: that is, we do not have an experience of trying while we are doing or being. It is only on reflection

or looking back that we are able to say, "I tried to be like a real mother." Beneath the notion of trying is the idea of "not." When a student tells me that she tried to do her homework, I am immediately aware that the homework is not done. If I say that I tried to lift the box, it means that I have not lifted it. If a cook says that she has tried to bake bread, she means that the resultant product did not meet her expected standards. We presume that if she put the necessary ingredients together in the prescribed fashion, she will have made bread, and yet by saying "I tried to bake bread," the cook has a sense of having missed the mark.

So, too, with stepmothering. It is only when I have stopped loving, caring, or being sensitive that I notice that I had been trying. Something in the experience, when I reflect, allows me to feel as though I have missed the mark. When the children come to visit, I do the things I think a good stepmother ought to do. I greet the children warmly, feed them, bake special cookies, talk with them, read stories, play. I am guardedly patient. I do all the things that I think a good stepmother would do; yet, almost inevitably when the children leave, I am left with the idea of "having really tried hard this weekend" and an unmistakable sense of having fallen short.

Within the context of trying is the notion of learning. If we try, we are expecting that it is possible for us to learn how to do something. If a child tries to ride her bicycle, she does so only because she has a hope of eventually being able to ride it. She senses that through instruction or experience she will be able to say, "I am riding my bike."

Is it possible, then, for me to learn how to be close, to love, my stepchildren? Certainly there is a myriad of books and workshops on the topic of good parenting techniques, but the practice of those techniques with my stepchildren leaves me with a sense of unrelatedness, with having missed the mark. As Meg, a stepmother to three children, said, "I read. We went to family counseling. There was less tension, but we weren't any closer."

I have had many experiences from which I might have learned how to get close to children. I am a teacher and a counselor. I have listened to, consoled, comforted, and encouraged my students at school. I have rocked and held my many younger brothers and sisters. I tended, with devotedness, my sister when she was burned as a baby. I have cradled nieces and nephews, read to them, talked, laughed, built Lego planes, tucked them into bed with kisses, and sat holding them in accepting silence. I have had many experiences from which I might have learned to love; yet, none of these experiences has provided the means to get closer to, to love, my stepchildren. Even my experience of being a mother to my son, Jason, has not improved my efforts at stepmothering. I have never experienced trying to love Jason. I do not have a sense of having

learned, through study, instruction, or practice to love him. I just do and my love for him is unconditional; it is not based on any need of mine. There is no will. It is not grounded in any interaction. I love him out of a total and continuing sense of communion and it is often my anger or irritation with Jason that brings forth the irrevocable relatedness which I experience with him.

Frustration or anger creates an awareness of the depth of my love for him. I have the sense that my demands, or even my ignoring him, is really a way of loving him. I can be angry, demanding, or even apparently neglectful because I do so within the context of my unconditional love. The content of our relationship draws its meaning from the context, and that context is one of unconditional love, of irrevocable relatedness, of us.

A Continuing Separateness

The context, which provides the ground for my relationship with my stepchildren, is one of separateness. It is the moment that holds the expected potential for intimacy that most often reveals our separateness.

Sometimes, in the morning, Robert and James climb into bed with Dennis and me, and I remember the occasions when Jason crawled into bed with his father and me as being moments of intense togetherness and unity. Now, when Dennis' children do the same thing, the separateness of our being is disclosed. The children greet us, "Good morning, Daddy; Good morning, Verna." I have a sense of there being Dennis and I, Dennis and his children, Dennis and his past, but not of "us": Dennis, me, and the children, together.

I have a similar feeling of separateness whenever I must tend to the children's bodily functions. I do not wipe their noses with the same affection as I know I have wiped Jason's. The wiping of Jason's nose called forth a knowing that he was sick and thus a hope for his getting better. Whenever I wipe my stepchildren's noses, it is just a nose—one does not hope for a nose.

Similarly, there is a distinct difference for me in changing James' diaper when he is wet and in changing it when it is dirty. When his diaper is wet, I am merely changing a diaper—wet one off, dry one under, fasten, little tickle, done. It is not until I get to the tickle that I have the sense of having changed James, to that point what I changed was a diaper. James' soiled diaper does not allow me that anonymity. I must now clean his bum; I must change him. He is, at the moment, someone else's child.

I have a recurring awareness of being separate from my stepchildren, and this awareness is never more acute than when I am irritated by their behavior. This unrelatedness is voiced by other stepmothers, too.

"Sometimes my stepchildren do things that get to me."

"I don't get along with Todd; he's like his mother."

"She (mother) lets them get away with everything."

My frustration, my anger, my expectations, even my ignoring the children is perceived as cruelty by myself and others because my behavior is not grounded in the context of relatedness but in the context of separateness.

A Call To The Past

Van Manen (1984) showed that we tend to experience our children as living with hope—as an orientation to their being and becoming, their future. Being with stepchildren is often a reminder of the past. The children's presence reminds me of the past of the man whom I love—his moments of intimacy shared with the other—their dreams, their hopes. My stepchildren are a reminder of his and their connection to another, to a past in which I have no share, of which I desire no part, and more importantly, of which the children want me to have no part. The children's past is revealed in many ways. I think little children should be in bed by eight o'clock, but Robert is allowed up until past nine because he is used to staying up later so that, as their father says, "I could spend some time with him when I got home from work." The children cannot spend Christmas with their father and me because they "always" go to their grandmother's place for Christmas. Their rituals, their way of doing things seems so foreign.

274

The Other Woman

Stepmothers are revealed by the other woman. It is through the absent presence of the children's mother that the stepmother is made. The children's mother is ever present in my relationship with my stepchildren. Their talk and their actions call their mother forth.

"My Mom takes us skating."

James cries from his bed, "Mom, mom" and when I go to pick him up—he flings himself face first onto the bed.

Tracy, whose mother has been dead for seven years, tries to make herself look "like the pictures of mom." "My stepmother is okay," she says, "But sometimes she forgets she is not my mother."

Stepmothers are constantly reminded of the children's roots, that they are not mother, and it is often the children who resent most the stepmother's efforts at trying to be like a real mother. David, a thirteen-year-old, put it succinctly when responding to his stepmother's greeting of, "Hello, I am your new mother," by saying, "The hell you are!" (Roosevelt, 1976).

Real Mothers Or Real Stepmothers

One stepmother, on taking her injured stepchild to the hospital and on having registered the child as her daughter, related this conversation between her and the doctor.

“When was her last tetanus shot?”

“I don’t know.”

“Has she had a tetanus shot?”

“I don’t know.”

“What kind of mother are you anyway?”

“A stepmother!” (Roosevelt, 1976)

The conversation exemplifies our taken-for-granted sense of the meaning of stepmothering. The myths of wickedness persist. Stepmothers are neglectful and would not be expected to care enough to know when or whether the child had received a tetanus shot. And so stepmothers are often confronted with the consequences of the unknownness of the child’s past. And yet, stepmothers often cannot help but want to treat their stepchildren like real sons and daughters, like real family.

What I didn’t realize was that I could never be a family with my husband and his children. Something was always working against it. By the time their exclusions stopped, mine began. I would have loved us to be a primary unit—then anything else could come and go and we could weather it. The way it is now, our love is truncated. I am fighting for a position I can never have. (Roosevelt, 1976)

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from conversations with other women, stepmothers.

References

- Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born*. New York: Bantam.
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- van Manen, M. (1984). Practicing phenomenological writing. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 2(1), 36-69.