

Finding/Freeing the Father: Exploring Feminist Fatherhood With Mother as Mentor



INTRODUCTION: Andrea Liss (2009) noted artist-mothers vividly explore “passe either/or dichotomies between feminist and mother through their embodied thinking and art making, giving life to fresh imaginings” (p. 152.) This visual essay imagines the potential of feminist motherhood and feminist fatherhood as a collaborative partnership that is paralleled in the creative production of text, image, and reflection that comprise the following sections.

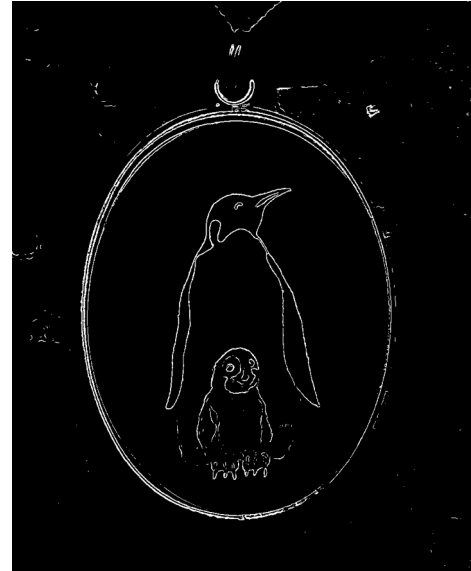


1. MY MOTHER GAVE ME A LITTLE PENGUIN NECKLACE a few months before I became pregnant. It evoked my childhood love of penguins, the sweet little creatures I loved to collect and snuggle in stuffed animal form. The image of the penguin parent & baby always feels like motherlove.

So too, as a college professor, the scrimshaw pendant seemed like the right sort of antique oddity to wear, hiding my dear pre-tenure wish for a baby in plain sight until tenure arrived a month before our daughter did.... After she was born, the pendant was a talisman, a lifeline between trying to teach and returning to her, to my office to nurse or to pump. (*Mother*)

2. BUT EVERY TIME MY WIFE WORE THE PENDANT once our daughter Imogen was born, I actually thought of it like a sort of emblem of me and our daughter - or mascot maybe. The father penguin, after all, would be responsible for keeping the egg warm, while it was the mother penguin who would provide for the family by seeking food. The father would eat nothing but ice as he waited with the baby.

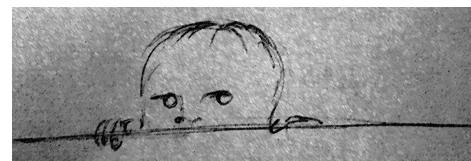
This sacrifice and familial arrangement is more prevalent in the animal kingdom; the penguin stands proudly among the emu, frog, and (less appealing) waterbug. But fathering is stranger in the “concrete jungle” where we live. (*Father*)



3. ASIDE FROM PRESIDENT OBAMA claiming the term “feminist” as one of many titles toward the end of his presidency, and a general benevolence towards fathers who vaguely participate in their children’s lives in public view, the feminist father is often alone in real, day to day parenting practices. Only recently (also thanks to Obama) was the BABIES act signed to include changing tables in all restrooms. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mens-restrooms-will-now-require-baby-changing-stations-thanks-obama_us_57fbe25ee4b068ecb5e0d3b0)

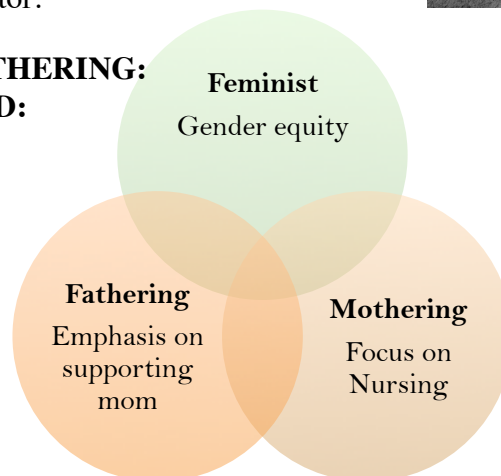
Maybe like the pendant, parenting can look and feel different when you look closely. It has many meanings. This chapter is our offering to Imogen, a 10-part collection of our notes, images, and reflections from our experiences with feminist fathering. Feminist fathering is proposed here as parenting practices that aim to bring equality to the labor and love of parenthood, with the mother as partner and mentor.

The recognition of feminist fatherhood is a bit delayed, even in the digital scene. A popular feminist fatherhood blog noted that a Google search of the term “feminist father” would unhelpfully suggest, “Did you mean feminist mother?” (No, no we did not.) (<https://feministfatherhood.com>)



EARLY FEMINIST FATHERING: MONTHS 1-2 CHARTED:

The intersections of feminism and parenting are our shared baby-wearing, cleaning, and care roles that can shift fluidly.



*chest-feeding should also be considered as part of trans-men’s parenting practices. (<http://time.com/4475634/trans-man-pregnancy-evan/>)



4. MODELS OF DISTANT FATHERS from our families and media diets seemed completely embedded in a hierarchy that both separated and anointed them. It is impossible for us to proceed as parents, perhaps, without reminders of the hierarchies and our own acknowledgement of their continued effects in our lives. Recently:

A little boy on the playground stumbles near me and my daughter. The father checks the boy for injuries and finds none. The father says, "You don't need to cry." He wasn't cruel - his tone was sweet and kind - but with five words he set that gender boundary and binary, that parenting practice. (Father)

5. PERHAPS WE ARE MOST UNITED with other parents by overarching philosophies of nurturing and practices of baby-wearing, with parenting practice as a sort of craft. When our baby wouldn't gain weight at one week old and we ended up mostly formula, I tried every device and supplement I could find to summon my milk. Thinking back to Dr. Sears' books on attachment parenting (2001, 2013), we opted for a soft sling that allowed me to hold Imogen without touching my sore cesarean section scars. With Imogen close to my skin, the milk finally, miraculously flowed.

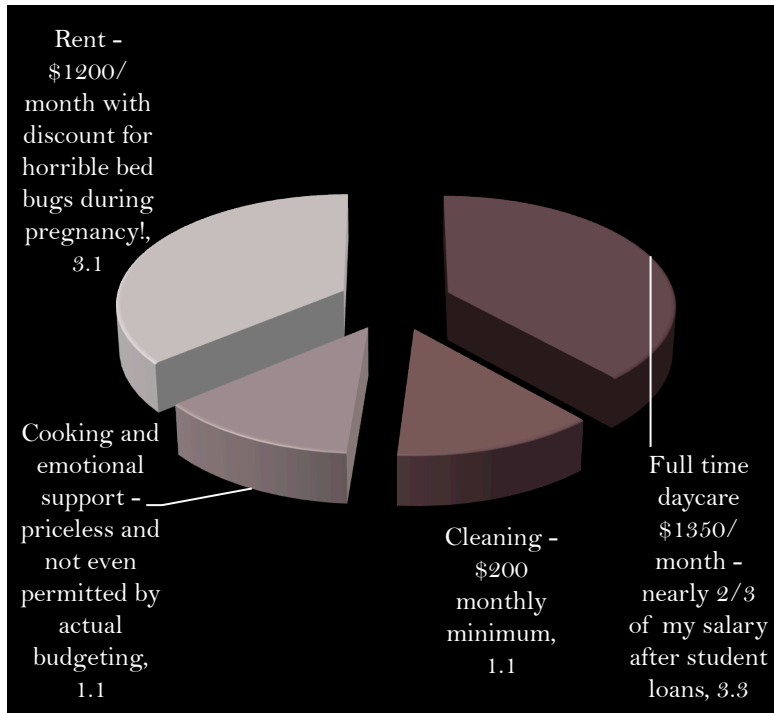
And there was a wonderful community of men and women in our area of the Bronx who also wore their babies wrapped up to their chests or backs. We followed them at playgrounds and on Facebook, soaking up ideas about diapers, co-sleeping, and trying to get some work done or occasionally catch a television show. We marveled at the ease of our neighbors' African back carriers where the baby lodged in colorful cloth at the arch of beautiful backs. (One of our favorite baby-wearing dad friends, when asked which of the children were his, laughingly corrected me: "Actually, I'm hers is more accurate." This struck me as feminist fathering, too.)

The exclusivity and privilege in some groups of babywearing parents irked us at times. One baby-wearing educator expressed xenophobic generalities that Japanese onbuhimos (now popular Western "onbus") were categorically unsafe. Others posted Facebook photos of "international" baby-wearing without names, attributions, or explanations. Baby-wearing has existed in all cultures, and we hoped to borrow and learn respectfully. (Mother)

The extent of fatherlessness, something we both experienced as children, is a research topic of the National Center For Fatherhood. This is an excellent resource, but probably not common knowledge for dads; it wasn't for us. Read more: <http://www.fathers.com/>



6. WHENEVER WE WORRIED ABOUT THE COST OF SLINGS AND DIAPERS, I continuously asked my wife to justify my role, my situation. She joked that she would create a **Father Work Invoice** with me to finally parse the importance of my presence as a parent. We began to document (below) how the campus daycare center, which never actually had space for our daughter but was deeply discounted for faculty, would never really work. Like many families, having one parent stay home could make good sense for us. Unfortunately, the parent penalty affects women workers more than men. I could help her to fight not to have courses taken away during labor (when Human Resources categorized her as disabled). I could help craft emails asking for proper compensation for all the **caretaking** she did in her program. But I could not fix the disparity in female professor pay. Still, I could raise a child who asked for “dada” nearly as often as “mama”.” (*Father*)



Parental leave resources couldn't help us, but they might aid others:

Amazing parents who lost their babies in daycare, from different political parties and various parts of the country now lobby together for presidential candidates to prioritize parental leave: <http://pix11.com/2016/08/22/moms-whose-babies-died-in-day-care-lobby-trump-clinton-to-prioritize-paid-parental-leave/>

FATHERHOOD FIRSTS (a sort of report card or certificate):

- First diaper changed (first 48 hours of diaper changes post c-section)
- First smile/laugh
- First potty use

7. STAY AT HOME MOTHERING as described by our SAHM friends, is a somewhat solitary endeavor. Moment after moment becomes a memory that only the mother will have, forgotten by the other party: the child. Perhaps photographed and texted, these moments are not replicated for the working parent.

With our relay-style parenting, we split these moments nearly evenly – but messily – and shared a sort of asynchronous set of rituals of reading, eating, painting, playing, sleeping, and city excursions. Our iconography of these years reflect subtle nuances. A father’s perspective is sometimes higher, taller. His play might be bigger, faster, and more able to spin “high in the sky.” Mothers tend to have milk. But this is just about bodies, not about gender identities.

We can each keep the gems of a daughter’s love of rainbows, inquiries each day about the moon, and childish camaraderie with the cat. We will equally remember the utterance of her first word “ba.” (supposed as the word for soul in Ancient Egypt).

8. OUR PARENTING RESEARCH located resources like Charlotte Peterson’s study of parenting across several cultural groups and time periods. We were awed while reading about parenting practices in Tibet, where fathers take on oft-feminized (or third shift, post-employment) duties of the household to allow new mothers to expand energies into healing and nurturing. Rather than being separated from the infant with outside or household work, the Tibetan father would also build a father-baby bond. Diaper changing and infant-wearing are also mentioned as a dad duty (Peterson, 2015). So too, Balinese fathers have been noted for their direct care of young children, baby-wearing practices, and the nurturing relationships these practices build. Though neither Tibet nor Bali is our culture of origin, we found this model to be particularly useful, not only because it reflected our practices but because it strengthened our hope for developing a deeper shared and interdependent bond between father, mother, and baby.



9. APPROACHING OUR DAUGHTER'S THIRD BIRTHDAY as parents who identify (on good days) as artists, making things is so much a part of our lives. We are often storytelling and drawing about our daughter as part of parenting (from writing this essay to making memory books and other works of art). Her favorite books tend to be the ones we make for her, or those we revise and re-tell to make a few of so many male characters into little girls. She also began to join us in her own representations, as any feminist protagonist might be expected to do. From digital drawings with dad:



To photographs of her painting sessions with mom.

10. WE ALSO REDEFINED AND RE-PRESENTED OURSELVES.

Like the male penguin mentioned before, the male seahorse reminds us that fatherhood is akin to motherhood. This unique creature even gives birth to the babies, sometimes by the thousands.

We saw other animal metaphors in parenting related to gestation. The so-called “elephant mom” is marked by extended caring and nurturing. This naming echoes the long gestational period of elephant babies. We saw our daughter in this way; she was our baby for longer than her infancy.

Artists have long represented animal selves, totem animals, and animal myths. Today’s feminist parents might become like chimeras, transcending gender and moving into more imaginative models of hybridity. We may eventually surrender particular presumed elements of gender identity in becoming parents; noticing and honoring, for example, how our daughter often cried “mama” not as a name, but as a sort of deep invocation for the concept of the composite mythic parent. We hope that our work as parents and as artists becomes a part of such legacies.



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