

2012 - Issue Three

Homosexual Parenting

KATRINA TEN EYCK

David with Susanna Margolis Strah, *Gay Dads* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2003, 288 pages).

Dawn Stefanowicz, *Out From Under: The Impact of Homosexual Parenting* (Annotation Press: 2007, 245 pages).

Gay Dads attempts to set before the reader the new American family, grounded on affection and choice rather than the marriage of a man and woman and their natural offspring. The author intends to give his readers the experience of being “present at the beginning of what I expect will one day become a more common aspect of gay life” (p. 2). He sees himself as one of the first to offer an inside look at what the American family is becoming. He includes the stories of admirable men who have welcomed children with serious medical problems (HIV positive, for example), or who have adopted children who are likely to be passed over by other parents. There is no reason to doubt the repeated claim made by various fathers that becoming a father has made them less selfish, helped them to grow up, and introduced them to new realms of love. But is this new familial form “equal” to the traditional family?

Unsurprisingly, many of the men followed in this book state that they assumed that being gay precluded fatherhood. As the author tells us, there are no unplanned pregnancies in this world. Becoming a gay parent is a rather complicated process requiring a good deal of planning. It may require numerous meetings with social workers, court dates, battles to win the child from the biological parents, wooing mothers who choose to place their children through open adoptions, coping with mothers who change their minds, travels to foreign countries, lying about their homosexuality, finding a gay-friendly surrogacy program, being matched with a surrogate, choosing an egg donor, and, not least of all, large expenditures of money.

Thus, the new family form requires a decision followed by an extensive process. Children are obtained through adoption, fostering with the aim of adoption, or surrogacy. Surrogacy can take two forms. Either the woman offers both her ovum and her uterus to generate a child through in vitro fertilization, or two women are enlisted, one providing the ovum and the other the uterus. In the case of surrogacy, typically one of the gay partners would provide the sperm, although this need not be the case. All of the methods are accompanied by unique difficulties, as the stories in this book detail, some of which are particular to gay dads. Homosexual men seeking to adopt are often the last priority for American social workers placing children in the United States, and hence if pursuing public adoption they can expect a longer waiting period (several years) and often a greater unwillingness on the part of the government employees to work with them. They have a much higher chance of receiving a child if they are willing to take children with special needs.

Most foreign countries are unwilling to give children to gay men, and hence these men must dissemble to qualify. Furthermore, the process can be very long and the legalities confusing and daunting. Fost-

adopt programs, which give foster parents the preference to adopt children, can offer a faster route to adoption, but also leave the men more vulnerable to the possibility that the child will be returned to his or her original parents. Surrogacy gives the potential dads the most control over the situation as well as involvement with the birth process; however, the price tag ranges from \$40,000 to \$100,000 and relies upon the willingness of at least one woman, and usually two, to undergo the fertility treatments necessary for a successful implantation of an embryo.

Finally, there is also the case of co-parenting. In this book co-parenting occurred when an agreement was struck between a female gay couple and a male gay couple to conceive a child through in vitro fertilization, and then share the parenting responsibilities for that child, who usually moves back and forth between the two households. This bears a certain resemblance to what happens after a divorce, but in this case the child's parents were never married and generally have friendlier relations. Nevertheless, as the book makes clear, co-parenting may still be quite stressful for the two sets of couples.

Clearly, the new familial form hailed by *Gay Dads* is not positively but negatively defined – as an alternative to the traditional form based on a marital union of male and female and the fruitfulness of their spontaneous sexual embrace. This new form does not require a mother. In the words of Will Halm, one of the fathers from *Gay Dads* who is also the co-founder of Growing Generations, an agency that matches gay men with surrogates and facilitates the birth and transfer process of the child, “everybody has a mother, right? Wrong, Halm insists, ‘We have an egg donor and a surrogate. No mother’” (p. 140). Even the surrogate, particularly if biologically related to the child, often drops out of the picture. Other fathers, often those who adopt, are more open to the possibility of the biological mother playing a role in the child's life. In general, however, mothers are absent from the family structure.

This absence of mothers prompts a question. Is not fatherhood itself altered by the absence of the mother? Is it true that one can have “no mother,” and, more to the point, not even have need of a mother? To ask such a question is not to deny that the fathers in this book have made great efforts to care for all the needs of their children. Rather, the question is deeper; it has to do with the origin of every child, and his relation to that point of origin, even when this is parceled out among more than one woman and a petri dish.

All of these men seek to mimic the fruitfulness of the traditional familial (man-woman) relationship. More to the point, the origin of every child remains inextricably bound to the coming together of a male and a female cell, and the sheltering home of a woman's uterus. The child thus bears a form in his coming into existence that two men alone (or two women alone) cannot generate. The child's existence speaks of a union that cannot exist between two fathers. David Strah, speaking of his own experience of becoming a father, seems to move in the direction of recognizing the child as a unique seal upon a couple's union: “It struck me then – it strikes me now – that this is the most powerful, most unbreakable bond two gay men can have. We can register as domestic partners, have civil union ceremonies, break up, buy and sell joint property, tussle over joint possessions. But this bond – being fathers to our children – is unbreakable, and it is forever” (p. 241)

The bond of parenting is unbreakable because the child's existence is one, and no divorce can divide the child. However, Strah falls short of recognizing the child as the sign of the existing bond of his union with his partner; instead, he sees the child as the source of that bond. The child unites the men in a common enterprise: “being fathers to our children.” But the child can simply never be the fruit of the union of two men in the same way that it is of a man and woman; they can never know that in this

child is the surprising, gratuitous superabundance of the act of giving one's self away to another. Logically then, the bond is transferred to the act of being a father, and the child becomes a source of union instead of the echo and confirmation of the union.

In such a situation the quality of parenting becomes paramount, for it is in the act of parenting that the union of the couple rests as well as the connection to the child. In this case, relations and bonds must be forged; they are not simple givens as in a biological relation. Without a doubt, one wishes that all children might have excellent parents, and certainly biological relation is not enough to ensure good parenting; nevertheless, good parenting alone cannot forge such a relationship.

Strah's comment further suggests that no matter what happens to him and his partner, even if they break up, they remain united in the child to whom they are both parents. It is well documented by the social sciences that children of divorce suffer serious consequences from the division of the two poles of their origin. Not only are they more likely to do poorly in school, suffer from depressions, act in more deviant and self-destructive ways, but also they particularly suffer when they move into adulthood and face questions of commitment. Similarly, the sufferings of adopted children are also well documented. Simply put, neither do as well as children raised within intact, biological families. The situations described in *Gay Dads* are without a doubt comparable to adoption, and quite possibly, in the case of surrogacy, comparable to a divorce, but a divorce inscribed at the very origin of one's existence.

The truth is, that Strah, and other men like him, do not really know the true effect of these alternative family structures upon the children they are raising. It simply is not justifiable to experiment upon the children to make the parents happier or less selfish or to give them the sense of an unbreakable bond. Any language of "the right to be a father" is completely out of place here, when becoming a father is tantamount to experimenting on a child. If obtaining a child is understood as the ultimate ratification of a lifestyle and a right, then parenting has become an exercise in self-affirmation and cannot but be abusive.

If Strah is correct that the form of the family is malleable according to one's election of who is and is not in one's family, there is no reason to limit the familial structure to that which is presented in the lives of the men in *Gay Dads*. Hence, a familial structure like that of Dawn Stefanowicz's family is also possible. In *Out From Under*, Stefanowicz tells the story of growing up as the daughter of a homosexual father. Her father could not be described as "out," nor could he be described as "closeted." Without ever directly acknowledging his manner of life, her father routinely offered a room in his home to his current boyfriend, and regularly socialized in the sexually active gay nightlife in her city, all the while remaining married to her mother and the father of three children. For Stefanowicz, this familial structure led to deep insecurities, fears, and pain that required many years of counseling and prayer to heal.

Stefanowicz does not describe horrendous physical or sexual abuse, so much as being neglected by parents who were absorbed more in the drama of their own lives and a home life without the security of any boundaries. The lack of these in her father's sexual life meant that the family life could be disrupted at any time to accommodate his whims and desires. Stefanowicz describes family "vacations" to gay resorts, or going cruising with her father in gay bars as a teenager. If the traditional form of the family falls, along with it fall the boundaries within which children have a sheltered space in which to grow and mature. As Stefanowicz's story shows, a world without boundaries is not a world of freedom, it is place of terrifying vulnerability.

It very well might be the case that those who support gay parenting and marriage would be horrified by what happened to Stefanowicz. They might even see her story as the reason why gay parenting and

marriage need to become a norm, so as to allow men like her father the freedom to live openly, avoiding such situations. However, it remains the case that in deconstructing the traditional form of the family and the forms that have given human sexuality limiting boundaries, the pathway is open to constructing families on any model, and nothing either in theory or practice will caution against the choices of Stefanowicz's father, so long as the choices are his own. Strah presents a series of fathers in his book that are likable, the families are even appealing, approaching typical family life in many ways, and yet all along the principle being pushed claims that their need be no normal – what about one mom and two dads? Three dads?

Ultimately in our relativistic society, when speaking of families, the final arguments seem to rest with welfare of children. To a certain extent the welfare of the children can be measured – how they do in school, language skills, social skills, how they fare in adolescence, etc.... And despite the American Psychological Association announcing in 2005 that “Not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents,” it is clear that social science has only begun to study this phenomenon and that there is *no scientific basis* upon which to make the claim that children who grow up in new familial structures fare as well as those in traditional families.[1] It is simply the case that the studies have not been done, and that further more, as Strah admits, the phenomenon of gay fathers seeking to obtain children is so new that finding a significant sample size for a study would be difficult. [2]

However, many things lie beyond the possibility of social researchers to measure. How can we measure the ramifications of being conceived within the intimate embrace of a man and woman who have irrevocably given the whole of their lives to each other, or, by contrast, in the absence of that embrace, separated from that originating relationship? There is, however, enough evidence of the pain that children who have lost their birth parents, who have been adopted, or who have lived through divorce, to call a halt to further unnecessary experimentation. In the face of a serious breakdown in the family, adoption is the attempt to salvage what one can. To create adoptive situations, to willfully break into pieces the origin of a child's existence, is thoughtless at best and selfish at worst.

NOTES

[1] An excellent evaluation of the APA's statement and its scientific grounding (or lack thereof) is found in the article “Same-sex parenting and children's outcomes: A closer examination of the American psychological association's brief on lesbian and gay parenting,” by Loren Marks, and can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.03.006>. As Marks makes clear, the APA relied on studies that generally compared lesbians and gay parents to single mothers; furthermore, none of the study's sample groups are statistically significant (the small sample groups were almost all taken from white, affluent lesbian populations; in addition, other authors have noted the difficulty in recruiting significant sample sizes) and could in no way provide general conclusions for the population at large. Furthermore, a significant number of studies focused on the parent's and not the children's welfare, and those that did focus on the welfare of the children relied on parental reporting. None of the studies focused on adult children. Marks goes on to argue that the APA's statement fails to follow its own guidelines for scientific, scholarly conclusions.

[2] Mark Regenerus has recently published the findings of the first-ever study involving a large probability sample (rather than a convenience sample) that compares adult children raised by homosexual parents to those raised by their biological families (the study also includes adopted children, divorced parents, step-parents, and single parents). Interestingly, Regenerus had difficulty finding families for the study that could be described as an intact gay family or intact lesbian family,

indicating the difficulty in studying such a family. His work can be found at:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.03.009>.

