

TOO MANY PARENTS

BY Stephanie Hansen

When is a parent not a parent?

A few weeks ago, my thirteen-year-old stepdaughter was rushed from her mother's house to the hospital by ambulance in a prolonged seizure the attendants could not stop. As her father and I arrived and flew through the emergency room doors, the receptionist opened the security door ushering him through ... while gently but firmly pushing me aside, closing the door, and saying, "I'm sorry but only parents are allowed." I thought I would faint. My head was spinning with fear and anger. When I reapproached the receptionist explaining that I was a stepmother and therefore a parent, she replied, "I'm sorry, but only two persons are allowed at a time."

I threw off my coat and stepped back into the freezing winter night hoping it would calm me. After a few minutes, I returned to the waiting room and leaned against the wall, muscles twitching with tension. I waited, I trembled, I cried, and I tried desperately to control my breathing. I was most definitely not the Buddha. People stared as I began to come apart at the seams. If I had a gun, I would have wielded it then and demanded they open the door and allow me to go to my stepdaughter's side. With my last ounce of self-restraint, I reapproached the receptionist and gasped, "I have known her most of her life. I taught her to walk. I taught her to eat, for God's sake. She does not even remember a life without me in it. Show me some mercy and just tell me, please, before I completely fall apart, whether she is alive or dead" I emotionally disintegrated as she rushed to the phone to call someone one for that information. There would have been a great deal less suffering that night if society respected the definition of parent without prioritizing us according to womb, wallet, and date-of-entry.

How many parents is too many? I was raised by two, a mother and a father, both ill equipped for the job. I was forced at a young age to come to terms with the fallacy that social roles reflect character and worth, and with the myth that procreating magically makes a person selfless and wise. My mother was mentally ill, verbally abusive in the extreme, and occasionally violent. Mom had moments of obvious clarity, though, that allowed her high intelligence, wisdom, empathy, and compassion to shine through her disability. The last time I saw her alive, she said to me, "No one will ever have to worry about you again, because if you haven't given up yet, you never will. I'm proud of you because I know what you had to go through to get where you are." She cried and said, "You've overcome the hardest thing anyone ever has: you've overcome yourself, and that's something I will never be able to do." All animosity toward her dissolved in compassion right there. I learned in that moment, by the look in her eyes. Buy the pain in my chest, that nothing is more precious than peace of mind. Peace of mind she would die not knowing. Was she one parent too many?"

My father's behaviour was far less volatile, any court would have granted him sole custody in a heartbeat, but I found my mother's illness more understandable than his indifference and indecency. My father's words and behaviour were misogynistic, racist, hypocritical, and disloyal in the extreme. He was admired for his role of patient martyr to a difficult wife, while at home

women were the butt of his every disparaging joke. He was respected for his responsible, hard-working demeanour, while at home he complained about having to work so hard to support “the lazy niggers on welfare.” He beamed proudly receiving a humanitarian award for raising money to support disabled children whom he privately admitted he wished had died at birth instead of living to become burdens on society. Thanks to my father, I am a sharp judge of character and know that how much people do is not as important as what they do, and that what they do is not nearly as important as why they do it. My father is my singularly greatest inspiration to build a life rooted in truth and decency, and to know who I am by looking to my motives. Was he one parent too many?

As a child, I would have been far better off without either of them, no doubt. As an adult, I look at my stepchildren and know how lucky I am. My oldest stepdaughter has severe brain damage that has left her socially maladjusted and occasionally violent. My mother taught me how to love that child without being blinded by her behaviour, without sacrificing myself, and to have the patience to wait for those moments when the intelligence, wisdom, empathy, and compassion shine through the disability. My younger stepdaughter is the bigger challenge because she is like my father in key attitudes: she is highly competitive, combative, and buys into notions of superiority. Thanks to twenty years of examples from my father, I will be able to teach her that people who maintain they are superior, invariably aren't and respect is something she has to give if she wants to keep it. Needless to say, we clash on every front like bicycle shorts and Armani shoes, though our goal is the same: to lay the foundation of a life for her that will afford her peace of mind when she outlasts the tumultuous years of childhood ... with as little collateral damage to those around her as possible, thank you very much.

My parents taught me, purposely and accidentally, just about everything there is to know about the human condition. They taught me how to recognize another person's true character and to learn from what I see. They taught me that my attitude and my actions always have direct and indirect effects on the lives of those around me. They taught me that whatever hurts heals in time, and that whatever's helpful is revealed in its own sweet time. That 's a lot to learn. That's a lot to offer. That's what I have to offer. That said, am I one parent too many?

The question reminds me of the time I was walking past the family courthouse and saw a man pull into a handicapped parking space, leap out spry as a buck, then tape a sign to his windshield: “I have a penis.” He waited to see if I would challenge his choice to park there or his political statement. I merely said, “I understand; I have a womb, but I've never used it.” Sympathetically, he responded with, “Oh, nobody needs you either, then.” How sad. And frightening. If all non-mothers are considered disposable on some level, how can we hope to protect the rights of people like my oldest stepdaughter who will also remain a non-mother? One of these days we are going to have to ban the use of all labels in court (ie. mother, father, daughter, etc.) and admit that what we have been arguing about all along is “which human beings are more useful and deserving of our trust and respect?”

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