On the Day You Were Born: A Phenomenological Study of Fathers' Experience of Being Present at Their Children's Birth

Nick Williams

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillips@g.duq.edu.
On the Day You Were Born:
A Phenomenological Study
of Fathers’ Experience of Being Present at Their Children’s Birth

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty
Of the Psychology Department
McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
Duquesne University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
by
Nick Williams
13 June, 2006
Nick Williams

On the Day You Were Born: A Phenomenological Study of Fathers’ Experience of Being Present at Their Children’s Birth

Doctor of Philosophy

13 June, 2006

APPROVED ________________________________
Eva-Maria Simms, Ph.D.

APPROVED ________________________________
Russell A. Walsh, Ph.D.

APPROVED ________________________________
Paul Richer, Ph.D.

APPROVED ________________________________
Francesco Cesareo, Ph.D., Dean
McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Chapter Two: Review of Selected Literature 6

Changes in Birth and the Role of the Father 6

How do Men Experience Pregnancy and Birth? 13

Chapter Three: Method 20

What are the Theoretical and Methodological Considerations 20

Collecting the Data 26

Interpreting the Data 28

Chapter Four: Stories of Fatherhood 40

Pablo’s Story 41

What Makes a Father? 43

Preparing For a Baby 45

Being at Home(birth) 49

Reflections on Becoming a Father 53

Ethan’s Story 57

On Fatherhood 57

The Pregnancy 60

The Birth 64

Being a Father – Postpartum and Beyond 67

Charlie’s Story 71

Family and the Father’s Role 72

The Pregnancy 75

The Birth and Retrospection 78
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John’s Story</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fatherhood</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pregnancy – Preparing for the Birth</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being at the Birth</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raising a Son</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad’s Story</td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning to be a Father in a Masculine World</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preparing For the Birth</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being at the Birth</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life With a New Baby</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Cross-conversation Analysis</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No One to Talk With</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To Feel That Connection</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Can I Help?</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To Be Maternal</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What I Do, What You Do</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working as a Team</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Do I Do Now?</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling Two Ways At Once</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is This Really Happening?</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who’s In Charge Here?</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six: Discussion</td>
<td>123</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Problem of Identity</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambivalence &amp; the Mythic Father</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Father My Friend</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is about fathers. It is also about everyone in a father’s life. Each person who plays a part in constituting the social fabric of a father’s world contributes to that man’s understanding of who he is, what is expected of him, and what he is capable of. Of course, the same could be said of any socially defined role. Being a graduate student, for instance, means very little in and of itself. It is only as the student’s journey carries her or him into contact with fellow students, professors, and voices from the past that speak through the pages of texts that the student begins to understand what it truly means to be a student.

Speaking as the father, I would like to convey my heartfelt gratitude and thanks to everyone in my world who makes my experience of fatherhood so rich and rewarding. In particular, I owe more than I can possibly say to my wife, Shannon. To whatever extent I can say I have thus far successfully executed my role as a father, it is because I have always had her by my side inspiring my own parenting by her example as a mother. Along those same lines, I would like to thank my daughters, Rosalea and Ella, for loving me and letting me know it over and over again. Also, I would like to thank my own father, who did not live quite long enough to meet his grandchildren, for teaching me that a father’s love is more valuable than anything else he has to offer.

Speaking as the student, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, without whom I simply would not have ever written this. My thanks go to Eva Simms, my director, advisor, and friend, for so many things. Besides inspiring me to write a dissertation about a subject that means more to me than anything else, Eva’s kind
encouragement and helpful suggestions kept me in school and kept me writing through this project. To Paul Richer I say thank you for always reminding me about the importance of keeping my theories grounded in the practical and for making me admit that I really do have an opinion about the issues that fathers face. My thanks go to Russell Walsh for his insistence that I make myself known in my dissertation rather than just disappearing behind the veil of the researcher.

Finally, to my peeps – you know who you are – thank you for witnessing our growth as a family and for being an integral part of our children’s lives as they grow toward adulthood and begin to confront the same struggles we have spent so much time and energy trying to figure out ourselves.
Seven years ago my first daughter, Rosalea, was born. I was there as my wife delivered that beautiful baby into this world. During her labor I found that much of the time I really had no idea precisely what I was supposed to be doing. Even appealing to my intuition was of little use. In the end I simply tried to be as aware as possible of Shannon’s needs while simultaneously trying to stay out of the way as well as I could. After the birth, I thought a lot about how the situation had made me feel. What I discovered was a mix of emotions. On one hand I was elated, so full of joy that I could not help weeping, both for my new baby and for the awesome power of this woman who I realized I was only now getting to see in her entirety. On the other hand, I was left feeling practically useless in the situation. It is true that I was the person who held Shannon and supported her as she bore down and pushed our baby out, but that somehow did not seem particularly special – anyone could have done that, right?

For several years following Rosalea’s birth I often returned to that scene in my mind, trying to determine whether or not I had done all that I could have to help. When we decided to have another child, Shannon and I were much better prepared. Not only had we already gone through this before, but we also knew where to start in getting ready for the birth. We talked a lot about what Shannon thought she might need and want from me and about what I hoped to get out of the experience. In this way, when the day finally arrived and Shannon looked at me and said those words (“it’s time”), I had my bearings in a way I never could have understood the first time around. Ella was born at home with
no complications. Her birth was perhaps the single most moving moment in my life. I felt at the time as I do now, that I knew what was expected of me and I did not need to worry that I was just taking up space. In fact, I felt that my presence at Ella’s birth brought me closer to Shannon than I had ever been before, and I was able to be part of the first moments together with our new daughter before day-to-day life came rolling back in the door.

I present this account in order to illustrate several points. First, at Rosalea’s birth I, like many men participating in their first birth, was ill prepared for performing my role (whatever it was). Second, my experience of that first birth was ambivalent in a number of ways, due at least in part to the fact that I did not know my place there. Third, thanks to our ongoing dialogue during the months after Rosalea’s birth and those leading up to Ella’s, Shannon and I were able to bring to light our concerns and our hopes for our second experience of birth together. I feel that this open communication and honesty had a direct and positive bearing on the course of Shannon’s labor and delivery, both by reassuring her that we had prepared well and all was as it should be and by giving me a sense of agency in the birth that I did not have at Rosalea’s birth.

In this dissertation I investigate the lived experience of men who were present at the birth of their children. I chose this topic because I was interested in gaining some insight into the varieties of experiences of different men as well as the similarities and overlaps. My motivation for this project was both personal and social. It is personal because I desired to hear other men discuss their feelings about being involved with birth – I am a young man and many of my male friends have not yet begun to have children and, frankly, this is such an important part of my emotional life that I wanted to find it a
home among other stories of this sort. My motivation is social insofar as I feel that it is essential to the evolution of gender equity and the humanization of the masculine that men become aware that there are many of us who have strong feelings of warmth, joy, love, and compassion that become particularly clear and present at our children’s birth. In his research with father’s groups, Linton (2000) discovered that, “men consistently expressed anxiety and concern that something was wrong with them, or that they must be abnormal because they were feeling so confused about becoming or being new fathers” (p.19). What this suggests to me is that men are still at the point at which communicating feelings that are suggestive of weakness or ignorance is unacceptable. It is time to challenge this stigma against feeling what we feel. As Samsor (1972) contends, “those who are interested in achieving a sounder society can do no less than encourage men to join actively in labor and delivery” (p.9). Ultimately, this project is necessary because fathers need to know that there are many others around them that are in the same predicament of increased expectations of their presence at birth and little-to-no education or preparation for the experience. This ought to be justification enough for many fathers who might read this, but this is also intended for those who are not fathers. For those readers this is an opportunity to gain some insight into contemporary fathers’ experience. The significance will undoubtedly be different for each reader, just as fathering is different for each father. However, upon hearing what the fathers participating in this study have to say about their birth experiences, the reader may begin to see fathers in a new light. For instance, a reader may come to understand the behavior of his or her own father, or a reader may suddenly appreciate the seemingly incongruous behavior of her partner during the birth of their children, and so on.
This research project was also designed with the academic community in mind, developmental psychologists in particular. Every source of information I have located concerning fatherhood research suggests that fatherhood as an academic interest is only now beginning to get the attention it deserves and that the importance of the many various roles fathers play in the lives and development of children is starting to be understood as significant. This dissertation adds to the growing body of literature that has been taking shape in the last three decades and, hopefully, provides a unique insight into the psychological dynamics of an important aspect of being a father.

It is clear that men *qua* fathers are in a state of crisis. For instance, Dowd points out that “fatherhood is a common life experience for nearly all men. Almost 90 percent of men marry, and nearly 90 percent of these become fathers” (2000, p.22). And “in 1965, about 5% of fathers attended the birth of a child. In 1989, almost 95% of fathers were present” (Linton, 2000, p.50). What we are looking at is an overwhelming majority of American men who are attending the birth of their children with little to no preparation and, in most cases, no one with whom they can talk about how they feel about their experience. In other words, new fathers are being asked by their society to open themselves up to a torrent of unfamiliar emotions and bear the burden of processing them alone.

Over the next several chapters, I will approach fatherhood and men’s experience of childbirth from several angles. First, I will review selections from the relevant literature concerning fatherhood and childbirth. There are several aspects of fathers’ involvement in birth that I will discuss in order to orient the reader to men’s current situation. The first is the changing role men have played in relation to birth throughout
American history. I should note here that I am focusing almost solely on the situation in the United States. This decision is based in part on the fact that, since I am and have always been an American I do not know enough of other societies to speak with any authority (or accuracy). Also, from my research it seems to me that of all societies, ours is perhaps the most in need of attention regarding this problem. As I will discuss in the history of fathers and birth, the United States was the epicenter of major changes in the practice of labor and delivery that had powerful effects on the father and his role in birth.

Following my review of selected literature I will discuss some of the methodological considerations concerning extant research on fatherhood, both in terms of how fatherhood has hitherto been approached by researchers as well as how I will look at fatherhood from a psychological standpoint. In this chapter I will also discuss the method I will employ to solicit and converse with fathers and to analyze and interpret those conversations. The final aspect of my method discussion will concern the importance of recognizing and explicating my own approach as a researcher.

Using my conversations with fathers, I will present narratives that are designed to condense and organize those conversations in order to give the reader a clear picture of each father’s experience as well as to elucidate the psychological themes inherent in them. Taking these themes beyond the structure of the narratives, I will, in the next chapter, compare the themes across the five narratives in order to illuminate those themes that are shared among my participants.

Finally, in my discussion chapter, I will consider these common themes in light of the concept of identity. My aim in this chapter will be to demonstrate the complexity of men’s process of identification as they become new fathers.
A Review of Selected Literature
Chapter Two

Changes in birth and the role of the father

“There is both anthropological and historical data to show that fathers have not always been excluded from the birthing room” (La Rossa, 1997, p.236).

Our story of the relationship between fathers and childbirth begins just prior to the Industrial Revolution. I choose this as the starting point partly because, as historian John Demos notes, “[f]atherhood has a very long history, but virtually no historians” (in La Rossa, 1997, p.3). In a review of the literature dealing with fathers, very little exists prior to the mid- to late twentieth century. It is a strange phenomenon; it is almost as if it was always assumed that either we knew all we needed to know about fathers or that there was simply nothing of interest there to study. Dowd (2000) points out that, “a review of the literature can support both propositions – that fathers are important and that they do not matter” (pp.46-47).

My other reason for choosing the Industrial Revolution as a crucial turning point in the history of fathers and childbirth is that it was in this period that fathers began to move en masse away from the home to find work (Dowd, 2000; La Rossa, 1997; Lamb, 1988; Griswold, 1993). This movement out of the home had a number of consequences for the father in terms of his role in the home. First, “as men began to venture farther from the family to earn a living, the dominant story of what men ‘do’ became one of provider, whereas what women ‘do’ remained nurturing and caring for children” (Dienhart, 1998, p.22). Phillips and Anzalone (1982) note that, “as the father spent more and more time away from home, many traditional functions of the father were inherited by the mother” (p.3).
During this period in American history, fathers were not generally present in the birthing room while the mother delivered the baby. However, fathers did play the important role of attending to the needs of the mother and the attendant (if one was present, it was generally a female midwife) such as heating water and preparing fresh blankets and towels, keeping the house warm, and communicating with friends and relations (La Rossa, 1997; Griswold, 1993; Wertz & Wertz, 1977). There is little in the documented accounts of that period to suggest that there was any confusion as to the father’s role or of his importance in the birth process. He was important behind the scenes but certainly not essential to the birth itself. If the father was not needed in the home, he had other options. “[During birth in nineteenth-century America] the father could choose to wait in the house with male friends or relatives or to go about his work at or near the home until the baby’s arrival was announced” (Phillips & Anzalone, 1982, p.2).

With the advent of factory work and longer hours as wageworkers, many fathers could not make time for attending to the duties once expected of them. His place in the home during birth had quite suddenly vanished. Meanwhile, a shift had begun to occur in the way birth was being practiced. Birth was rapidly becoming seen as a medical procedure and, therefore, fell into the purview of medical doctors and the medical establishment (Wertz & Wertz, 1977). As Phillips and Anzalone (1982) point out, “the setting for childbirth began to move into hospitals for those who could afford them, and now instead of waiting in his parlor or his shop for his child to be born, the father found himself waiting in a hospital’s Father’s Waiting Room” (p.4). And, “large cities were building beautiful modern women’s hospitals with well-equipped modern obstetric units,
where the mystique surrounding birth could isolate the father even more” (p.4). Finally, “in each of these successive steps [toward modernity], the father’s role at birth was less clearly defined, until he was finally excluded from the labor and birth process” (p.2).

This progressive exclusion of the father from birth also took its toll on mothers. By the early decades of the twentieth century, birth had become doctors’ work. This development meant the widespread disappearance of midwives from the birth scene as well. Mothers were finding themselves alone with a staff of (usually well-trained and technically competent) strangers (Wertz & Wertz, 1977; Odent, 2002). In many ways, birth no longer belonged to human beings so much as to medical science. “Childbirth became a medical procedure – something to be done to the woman rather than something that was done by her’” (Phillips & Anzalone, 1982, p.9). Like all other non-medical staff, “the father was viewed as a possible source of contamination and was relegated to a waiting room” (p.9). Thus, while the father was still allowed to be in the general vicinity of the birth of his children, his role was ultimately reduced to less than a spectator. “In the early decades of the twentieth century, books and articles published in the United States often advised the expectant father to take ‘enough smokes’ to the hospital as well as comfortable slippers so that he could pace in comfort” (p.8-9).

In 1932, the publication of Childbirth Without Fear by obstetrician Dr. Grantly Dick-Read, changed the way fathers and childbirth were seen yet again. Dr. Dick-Read proposed that his method of “natural childbirth” could bring about fewer complications associated with birth as well as making birth a joyous and satisfying experience for mothers (and fathers), rather than the terrifying and confusing experience that birth had become as it moved deeper into medical territory (Wertz & Wertz, 1977; Phillips &
Anzalone, 1982). This was an important step in bringing fathers back into the birth picture. As Romalis (1993) notes, “this movement toward natural childbirth went hand in hand with bringing men into the labor and delivery rooms” (p.240). Dr. Dick-Read’s formula included the presence of the father as a calming agent for the mother, so that she could better focus on the task at hand, and also as a coach to guide her through her contractions and into transition.

The medical establishment did not, as may be supposed, accept Natural Childbirth unquestioningly. The following quote from Fielding & Benjamin’s (1962) *The Childbirth Challenge: Common Sense versus “Natural Methods”* will illustrate this point:

> A husband may attend prenatal classes with his wife, have lengthy, reassuring chats with her doctor, even see educational films showing a childbirth in Technicolor. But the fact remains that, when the star of the production is his own wife and the performance is “live,” the average reaction of the average husband has been found to be little short of terror. What is an ordinary amount of blood loss, from the obstetrician’s point of view, invariably seems a torrent to the unschooled husband. What looks like a normal newborn baby to the obstetrician may be a shocking disappointment to the father (in Phillips & Anzalone, 1982, p.11).

Clearly, the opinion of some medical professionals regarding the efficacy of fathers was not high. In fact, with the exception of *Childbirth Without Fear*, it was not until the 1950s that books began to address the role of the father in birth with any real conviction. For example, in 1956, Genné published *Husbands and Pregnancy: The Handbook for Expectant Fathers*. This manual addresses “the army of expectant fathers” (p.11) and extols the virtues of the well-disciplined and obedient father. When Genné remarks to fathers that, “merely your presence can be a big help to [the mother] and give her a sense of calmness and security which is very beneficial” (p.72), it does not appear
to be so much in favor of making the mother’s experience that much better than in making the doctor’s job a little easier. Genné even goes on to tell fathers to, “always abide by [your doctor’s] decisions. He knows what is best for your wife” (p.74). Thus, although there is evidence that fathers were beginning to regain some of their lost part in the drama of birth, their position had been reduced to a go-between, assisting the doctor by keeping his wife quiet and subdued as much as possible (Wertz & Wertz, 1977). By the end of the 1950s fathers still had not begun to receive any real respect from the medical personnel who had gained control of the birth of their children and who coveted the power and responsibility of such a charge.

History often shows us that social change comes in waves – often the first wave will recede and things will return to the status quo for a time before the next wave rises. This is certainly true of the burgeoning acceptance of fathers’ presence in the birth scene. Odent (2002) claims that the participation of fathers in birth did not really become a major theme in the American practice of birth until thirty years after Dick-Read’s revolutionary book. He says, “in the 1960s […] a new generation of women felt the need to be assisted by the baby’s father when giving birth” (p.96). In Odent’s estimation, “the participation of the father at birth is undoubtedly an aspect of industrialized childbirth” (p.96). In other words, the more confined and sequestered mothers became at the hands of the hospitals, the stronger the demand for the presence of fathers grew.

Still, rather than openly embrace the presence of fathers in the labor and delivery wards, many doctors and nurses reacted with resentment and sometimes open hostility. Samsor (1972) tells expectant fathers, “if the doctor is unsure of what the father’s role is supposed to be, he may see the father’s presence as an implied criticism of his own
ability to perform, or he may feel that his professional judgment is being called into question” (p.138). This perceived challenge of the doctor’s sovereignty led to stories such as the following: “Generally, you can trust your obstetrician, although one expectant father told us that when the team was actually in the delivery room, the doctor pointed a stern finger at him and said, ‘You – sit there!’” (Bittman & Zalk, 1978, p.178).

Progress in the movement to get fathers into delivery rooms was not uniform throughout the country. Although some states were, as a whole, very willing to allow fathers to participate in birth, many still had laws in effect which either expressly forbade their presence or at the very least gave doctors free reign to admit or exclude fathers as they saw fit. The state of affairs was such that “in some area of the United States men handcuffed themselves to their wives in labor so that they could not be separated” (Phillips & Anzalone, 1982, p.10). Tension between hospital staff and parents was at its highest between the late 1960s and mid-1970s. Parke and Beitel (1986) tell us, “as late as 1972, fathers were permitted in the delivery room in only 27 percent of American hospitals” (p.299). Finally, in 1974, “the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists endorsed the concept of the husband or ‘other companion’ remaining with the woman in labor” (Phillips & Anzalone, 1982, p.11). And, “by the end of the 1970s, fathers could be admitted to delivery rooms in approximately 80 percent of American hospitals” (Coltrane, 1996, p.49).

Many researchers have documented the positive effects of the father’s presence at birth. For instance, Macfarlane (1977) remarks, “if the father is there […] it is far more likely that the mother will openly demonstrate her feelings, be they joy, despondency, or anything else” (p.54). Also, “studies have shown that the father’s presence in the labor
room results in a decreased need for analgesia” (Phillips & Anzalone, 1982, p.13). And “in a study of 51 father-infant dyads, those fathers who held their infants in the first hour of life demonstrated more nonverbal interaction with their infants at 1 month of age than those who did not have this early contact” (p.15). Parke and Beitel (1986) have commented on the positive effects of the father’s presence on the laboring mother. “Fathers were five times more likely to touch their wives than nurses were to touch their patients” (p.299). “Women whose husbands participated in both labor and delivery reported less pain, received less medication, and felt more positive about the birth experience than women whose husbands were present only during the first stage of labor” (p.299). And finally, “the father’s presence during the second stage of labor and delivery increased the mother’s emotional experience at the birth; mothers reported birth as a ‘peak’ experience more often if the father was present” (p.299).

Today, as I have noted above, nearly all fathers in the United States attend the birth of their children. In light of the relatively recent and extremely turbulent history of fathers’ and mothers’ attempts to gain the right for fathers to attend birth this seems like a very real victory. However, this brings me to the next aspect of fathers and childbirth that must be addressed. It has to do with the fact that, during the decades leading up to the now widespread practice of fathers attending their children’s births, very little has changed in terms of how society prepares fathers for the experience of birth. Alongside that is the fact that almost nowhere in the literature can one find any attention paid to the hopes and fears of the expectant father. In the next section I will look at some of the psychological dynamics of expectant fatherhood and the father-to-be’s presence during childbirth.
How do men experience pregnancy and birth?
“The meaning of pregnancy for each father is individual and idiosyncratic” (Diamond, 1986, p.55).

Compared with almost any other area of human experience, there is a dearth of books and articles on the topic of men’s experience of fatherhood, and even fewer on that of men’s experience of childbirth. Phillips and Anzalone (1982) remark, “much information can be found in textbooks relative to the importance of the father’s understanding all physiologic and psychologic [sic] changes of the woman during pregnancy. Although again and again he is encouraged to help her, support her, anticipate her needs, and understand her, little is written regarding his needs” (p.xi).

Linton (2000) argues that, “the most profound and complicated event in a man’s life is becoming a father. It is also the least understood and, until recently, the least researched topic in the study of adult development” (p.17). And Diamond (1986) points out that, “[in a] review of the parenthood literature, only five percent […] is reportedly devoted to the experience of fatherhood” (p.42). In my search for relevant literature about fatherhood and childbirth I found very little indeed. In fact, only one book actually dealt specifically with this issue, and that from an anthropological point of view. In Birthing Fathers: The Transformation of Men in American Rites of Birth, Reed (2005) makes a compelling case for the need to recognize the ways in which American birth practices have changed in the past several decades and how these changes have affected fathers. Reed’s vantage point as an anthropologist allows him to view this phenomenon as a shift in cultural rituals. Although his discussion is germane to fathers’ current predicament, what Reed does not address with any real attention, and what I hope to add to the discussion, is the psychological dimension of this shift in cultural awareness.
There are essentially two veins that run throughout what literature is available on this topic. One vein deals specifically with narrative accounts as told by fathers. This literature is helpful not only in giving fathers a voice and forum, but also in conveying this voice to the rest of society so that society may begin to recognize the father’s role as an active participant in birth and as someone who feels the event as strongly as anyone else involved. The second vein approaches the father’s experience from a psychoanalytic developmental perspective. In this arena, researchers are interested in the ways in which becoming a father relates to wish fulfillment and unconscious motivations.

The literature that deals primarily with fathers’ accounts generally portrays fathers’ experience of birth as a very emotional and intense time. Much of fathers’ experiences appear to be ambivalent. That is, although most fathers report powerful positive emotional experiences, they are often juxtaposed with feelings of inadequacy, fear, jealousy, etc. (Linton, 2000; Coltrane, 1996; Diamond, 1986). Coltrane, for instance, observes, “many fathers marveled at how lucky they were to become parents at a time when men could be present and join in the birth experience rather then being relegated to a hospital waiting room” (1996, p.58). At the same time, “some fathers referred to the peripheral role they played in the birth of their children, and a few indicated that they struggled with feeling useless during the process. For those who talked about it, the lack of centrality appeared to be a profound learning experience” (p.59).

Phillips and Anzalone (1982) found that “although many expectant fathers have a so-called normal joyful reaction to impending fatherhood, some may react with
depression, fear, anger, or jealousy” (p.7). And Diamond (1986) cites a study by Shapiro that catalogues common experiences reported by fathers:

[Shapiro] reported seven major fears surfacing among expectant fathers participating in the birth experience: (1) queasiness in the delivery room; (2) paternity concerns; (3) anxieties involving the ob-gyn establishment and hospital procedures; (4) losing one’s spouse or child by death or ill-health; (5) being replaced by the infant; (6) increased responsibilities; and (7) existential issues pertaining to life and death (p.56).

Taken as a whole, the body of evidence taken from fathers’ accounts points to their ambivalence concerning their experience of childbirth. One can argue that this is due to some extent to the lack of preparation available to expectant fathers. Phillips and Anzalone (1982) say as much: “Men do not undergo an extensive social preparation for fatherhood, even though pregnancy is a crucial time for them also” (p.6). And Diamond (1986) states, “most fathers have not had a male model for this changing cultural norm” (p.42).

Most researchers seem to feel that, rather than being problematic, this mix of emotions is a promising sign, a sign that men are approaching a new (and perhaps better) stage in their collective evolution. Cowan (1988) says, “expectant and new fatherhood is both a crisis and a developmental opportunity for maturation and new growth” (p.13). Also, citing numerous authorities for support, Diamond (1986) argues that “parenthood as a stage in the life cycle represents an important developmental step” (p.53). And Linton (2000) argues that, “it is this avalanche of new feelings, which if understood and not feared, can help humanize us as men in the most fundamental and profound way” (p.49). Phillips and Anzalone also mention that “most participating fathers think of their help in labor and birth as essential to their experience as expectant fathers” (p.xiii).
Another important aspect of this relatively new trend in fatherhood is the effect of the father’s participation in birth on his relationships with his partner and their children. Linton (2000) wonders “what it will be like for the next generation of children whose fathers attended their births – when our sons and daughters say to us that they are thinking about having a baby, and we can say, ‘I remember when you were born’” (p.52). And he goes on to say that “fathers who are able to participate in the birth of their children often report that the sharing of this experience with their partners remains one of the most important moments in their lives” (pp.52-53). Peters et al (2000) describe a common phenomenon that occurs between the new father and his baby immediately following birth. They comment, “the term ‘engrossment’ to describe[s] the sense of absorption, preoccupation, and interest that the newborn evokes from fathers” (p.298).

The psychoanalytic approach to fathers’ experience of birth can help shed light on the meaning and/or root of these ambivalent feelings and experiences. As Diamond (1986) points out, “in spite of cultural pressures to be more involved in pregnancy and birthing, the male’s thoughts, emotions, and conflicts continue to be ignored – a predicament [amounting to] a ‘cultural double-bind’” (p.42). He stresses the importance of attending to the issues that may underlie fathers’ desire to become parents in the first place. He says, “[fathers] have had little time to adjust to the internal conflicts evoked by being present during a situation (i.e., parturition) requiring the considerable passivity of a background supporter and, consequently, have not learned to master the situational anxiety in other than what are inappropriate masculine ways of taking charge” (p.43). In other words, although the father has become a common presence in birth, his
level of preparedness often does not include learning to recognize how to assume a role that is, in most other areas of his life, uncharacteristic of manhood.

Diamond (1986) lists several wishes he has identified as being associated with becoming a father. The first wish he describes is what he terms a generative wish to continue the self. Of this wish he says, “Erickson used the term ‘generativity’ to refer to the concern arising in adulthood for establishing and guiding the next generation. He viewed this as an essential stage on the psychosexual as well as psychosocial schedule” (p.50). In support of this view, Diamond mentions the fact that birth rates soared during World War II, resulting in that generation earning the name “baby-boomers.” According to the dynamics of this wish, fathers consider the birth of their children to represent their own immortality – their children will carry on the father’s life as they live their own.

Another wish Diamond recognizes is the wish for a “primary illusion.” He says “the term ‘primary illusion’ [refers] to the powerful and oscillating images present in all human beings of the ultimate dream of simultaneous mutuality and autonomy” (1986, p.51). In essence this is a wish to experience a sense of individuation – that I am my own self – while at the same time experiencing a sense of being part of life in perpetuity on an absolute scale – that I am one small part of a much larger unified whole. Continuing on this theme, Diamond says, “the prospects of parenthood promise the possibility of recapturing fusional love without sacrificing autonomy, an option doubly important for the prospective father” (p.51). The birth of a child, from this perspective, represents the satisfaction of a seemingly impossible demand placed on the father. He is now able to experience his own sovereignty and autonomy while simultaneously satisfying a desire to “be one” with another. This experience appears even more pronounced in many cases in
a father’s love for his children than in his love for his partner, and this is often seen in narratives of fathers’ experiences of trying to remain an active member of his children’s lives following separation or divorce from the mother.

Yet another wish Diamond discusses is the wish to expand the self. “The expectant father coming to accept his burdens and responsibilities, his sacrifices and curtailments of freedom, courageously ‘transcends the juvenile ideals of manliness’ [...] and consequently advances both as an autonomous self and in relation to his beloved others” (1986, pp.51-52). By becoming a father, it is possible (according to this idea) for a man to become more than himself. That is, he develops not only by becoming more mature by societal standards, but also by recognizing in himself the capacity to contribute to humanity more substantially than he had even known possible prior to the birth of his children.

The wish to expand the partnership by increased mutuality expresses fathers’ desire to regain a sense of shared responsibility in the creation and maintenance of the home and the family. This is, according to Diamond, a difficult task for a number of reasons, foremost being the alienation fathers have experienced at the hands of the appropriation of birth and the increased external demands on his time and energy. Diamond cites Jessner’s comment that “if unmanageable escalating anxieties do not alienate the parents from each other, they find in parenthood a deeper meaning to mutuality that fortifies trust in life” (Jessner in Diamond, 1986, p.52).

Finally, Diamond lists reparative and identification wishes to revitalize one’s own parents. He says that fathers can, through procreation, “bring back to life” certain aspects of his own relationship with his parents that have previously been foreclosed. In
so doing, the father has the opportunity to make right perceived wrongs suffered by him in his own childhood by being the father he wishes he had had. Alongside this, the father can also continue the legacy of positive instances of parenting in his own childhood by emulating his parents.

The cross-fertilization of fathers’ first-hand narratives recounting their birth experiences and psychoanalytic developmental theories of men’s motivations to become fathers can provide an illuminating insight into the conflicts present in nearly every man’s account of his experience of the birth of his children. Unfortunately, much of what little is available on this topic is already twenty years old. I have carried on this approach with new narrative accounts, reflecting the effects of recent shifts in social attitudes toward fathers. In rendering these narrative accounts I have tried to present an image of fatherhood that portrays both the individual and collective experiences of fathers who are part of the birth of their children as they are given. Along with that, I offer an interpretation of these experiences in relation to the notion of identity. In order to make my conversation more concrete, I discuss the relevant themes and their relationship to a father’s identity in light of the history of social attitudes toward fathers and social practices of childbirth in the United States.
What are the Theoretical and Methodological Considerations?

“A complete analysis of fatherhood rests upon a complete human discourse, one that integrates social sciences, human studies, and soul searching” (Gabarino, p.21).

According to Lamb (2000), by the 1970s fatherhood research had become much more fashionable than ever before. Prior to this new interest, the scant research being conducted consisted largely of theoretical arguments aimed at defining the traits the writers considered desirable in fathers. With the increased interest in fatherhood, social scientists and public policy makers felt the need to provide a more reliable model of the “good father” upon which sound policy could be constructed. This led to, “a shift from a focus on qualitative dimensions of fatherhood (including such traits as masculinity and dominance) to quantifiable dimensions” (p.25).

However, many of the constructs that researchers sought to investigate were ill defined at best. One such construct, Father Involvement, is the most prevalent example of this new paradigm in fatherhood research. It also exemplifies a major problem associated with traditional quantitative research methods when they are applied to the human sciences. The shift from a focus on qualitative dimensions to quantitative dimensions of father involvement led to “a restricted focus on paternal nurturance with little if any attention paid to the other functions or aspects of fatherhood. The narrowly focused view of fatherhood that resulted ignored subcultural variation in the definition and understanding of fatherhood” (Lamb, 2000, pp.23-24).
Researchers were in agreement that fathers play an important role in society and in the family and they hoped to demonstrate this belief by measuring the amount of time fathers spent in the home. Lamb (2000) points out that, “the emergent concern with the extent of paternal presence helped promote a very quantitative concern with variation in the amounts of time that fathers spent with their children” (p.29). In other words, the model of fatherhood and the paternal role that researchers and policy makers presented to their colleagues and the public were limited to a specific cultural group’s beliefs and expectations. Father involvement was conflated with the amount of time fathers spent in the home. This approach neglected to take into account those situations in which fathers were forced to work long hours but who, upon returning home, spent what time they had loving their children, nor did it acknowledge the many loving fathers who did not live with their children. It also failed to take into account the possibility that many fathers who were in an economic niche that allowed them a lot of leisure time did not necessarily spend it engaging with their children.

Thankfully, most contemporary fatherhood literature reflects the growing sentiment that strictly quantitative methods cannot adequately represent the subtleties of fatherhood. Parke (2000), for one, comments on the necessity that researchers “recognize how difficult it is to define the complexities of father involvement” (p.43). He even goes on to say that, “psychologists, in particular, have recognized the need to move beyond crude distinctions between father presence versus father absence as an approximation of involvement” (p.44).

The issue of father involvement illustrates the historical movement of fatherhood research over the last three decades. Tracing the historical shifts in fatherhood research is
an important step in determining how I will design my own research on fathers and childbirth because it helps to demonstrate the point that Hewlett (2000) makes: “The way father involvement is conceptualized often influences how research is conducted and policy is developed” (p. 60). The strong belief in the importance of father’s involvement in home life led to a restricted approach to research that focused only on those aspects of fatherhood that could either confirm or deny researchers’ biases. Instead of illuminating fatherhood, this style of research tended to obscure all but a relatively small aspect of it from administrative and social scientific discourse.

Hewlett’s remark poses a theoretical consideration that bears on my research insofar as it implies that there are many ways to study fatherhood and that there is much to learn from fathers. Trends in contemporary fatherhood research suggest that this notion is gaining ground. With the movement away from quantitative research methods an important question comes up: How do we formulate a qualitative study of fatherhood without returning to the days of moral prescriptions for “desirable” traits? It seems to me that the single most important point to keep in mind when designing research is that this research is not (ideally) for the benefit of the researcher. Rather, the study ought to be intended for the good of the participants and the populations they are purported to represent.

It would not be appropriate to begin a study of fathers’ experiences of participating in childbirth without making it clear that I could not avoid having my own set of preconceptions and beliefs about fathering. As von Eckartsberg argues, “We cannot escape our theoretical presuppositions, our approach. All we can do is to try to make our approach as explicit as possible” (von Eckartsberg, quoted in Walsh, 1995, p.
Walsh (1995) characterizes approach as “the total of presuppositions and expectations that guide a research project” (p.334).

The notion that the researcher’s approach must be made explicit is an all-too-often disregarded aspect of research. “Much of psychological research is conducted without sufficient regard for the taken-for-granted assumptions that drive each study” (Walsh, 1995, p.335). Rather than making the mistake of believing that I could avoid possible contamination of my results by remaining in some way neutral to the phenomenon I have instead made this project, in part, an exercise in rigorous self-reflection. In other words, my own approach as a researcher (as discovered through an interpretive process similar to that which I employed to understand my participants’ narratives) was subjected to the same scrutiny as participants’ accounts. I will speak more about precisely how I formulated this rigorous self-reflexivity in my discussion of data interpretation.

Of course, recognizing that I, the researcher, have my own approach did not negate my concern that I avoid making prescriptions for behaving this way or that based on my research. One way of helping to control for the tendency to push certain agendas in research was to recognize both individual and cultural differences between my participants and myself. To emphasize this point I will once more mention the prevalence of research on the issue of father involvement and its implications. Beall (1993) has this to say on the matter of ethnocentric thinking in fatherhood research:

Due to the assumption that father involvement is highly desirable, all of the papers in this collection and the national institutes that foster research on fathers […] are organized around the idea that father involvement should be increased […] This reliance on strong moral authority reminds me of dairy commercials that say ‘milk is good for you’ – which assumes that milk is universally good for all. The reality, of course, is that milk is not good for most lactose intolerant peoples of Mediterranean, African, and Asian descent where it can cause upset stomachs and diarrhea (p.61).
In effect, Beall’s point is that we cannot simply assume that what is good for some is good for all, or even that certain “truths” that apply to specific social groups can be generalized to all of humankind.

A distinctive feature of culture is that it is by nature ethnocentric. Once one acquires cultural beliefs and practices and utilizes them for some time, there is a tendency to feel that these beliefs and practices are natural and universal (Hewlett, 2000, p.60).

Hewlett’s comment reminds us to consider each and every social phenomenon as being inherently culture-bound. The value of this practice lies not just in the fact that doing so helps allay the potential for generalization. It also helps to clarify the intricacies and contradictions often present in socially agreed upon practices. Hewlett points out the benefit of making cross-cultural comparison a part of research: “By looking outside of our own culture, we come to better understand how our own culture affects how we feel what is right or wrong” (p.61).

The theoretical basis for this kind of approach to research has its roots in the school of thought generally known as social constructionism. Two of the basic tenets of social constructionism are that (1) “People actively construct their perceptions and use culture as a guide to do so” (Beall, 1993, p.128) and (2) “Social constructionism is concerned with how people come to understand the world around them and with how they come to define ‘reality.’” (p.127). In other words, the world is not so much objectively given in the sense that it is a stable and real thing as it is the product of an ongoing negotiation between its participants and is co-constituted through our interaction with it. Likewise, we are not beings in isolation from the influences of the world. Just as
we effect a certain world to become for us, the world exacts from us a certain way of being in it.

The milieu of this interplay is culture. In terms of why this is important for my project, the following passage says it nicely: “Ultimately, meanings are interpretations constructed in social interaction, and as such they are interpretable only in the light of specific cultural practices” (Dienhart, 1998, p.xi). This is not to say that the meanings that fathers make of their own experiences are not valid. Instead, the implication of this way of looking at the construction of meaning provides an interpretive lens that allows for yet another way of making sense of what is being said.

If culture is the setting of this process of making the world and being made by the world, then language is one of the most significant tools we employ to do this with others. At the same time, language is the medium within which our thoughts and beliefs are formed and conveyed to one another. As Schwandt (2000) says, “language [can be] understood as a range of activities in which we express and realize a certain way of being in the world” (p.198). Those statements and phrases that concern themselves with a common topic form a discourse that is characterized by its topic while simultaneously giving its topic a shape and character. Schwandt describes discourse as “the material practice that constitutes representation and description” (p.197). The discourse of fathers’ experiences of birth will emerge from their narrative accounts and will provide insight into both the fathers’ individual ways of understanding the world and the relationship between fathers’ perception and the attitudes held by the culture in which they (we) live.
To summarize, my theoretical premises are that what we call reality is a perception of the world resulting from a dynamic interplay between individuals and the social world; how we come to define reality is guided by the culture in which we live; language is a major mode of transmission of cultural beliefs and values; and, finally, we can interpret the texts that reflect these beliefs and values by analyzing the various discursive currents running through them.

**Collecting the Data**

When I began looking for participants for this study I quickly discovered that every (and I mean *every*) father I spoke with expressed great interest in my topic. Although I posted flyers at Magee Women’s Hospital and asked a local childbirth educator to distribute flyers to expectant fathers in her classes, I also received many requests from fathers I know or who had heard about my research interest from mutual acquaintances. In no time I had no fewer than twenty responses, via email and phone calls, from fathers who expressed interest in participating in my research. Of the men who responded, nine had learned about my project from my flyers. The others were either men I knew personally or who had heard about my project through word of mouth. After speaking with all of these men I chose five to ask to meet with me for a conversation about their experiences of becoming and being fathers. I chose three men from the nine who responded to my flyer and two who I already knew. I based my decision of who to include in this study on several factors. For instance, the two men with whom I was already acquainted I chose not only because I feel them to be very thoughtful and articulate but also because they both represented demographics that were
not reflected in those men who responded to the flyer. Pablo is a Chilean man who moved to the United States several years ago, and I felt that his perspective on fatherhood could provide some insight into how cultural differences play a part in configuring a man’s experience of fatherhood. John is not only a father, but is a grandfather as well. He was the only man with whom I spoke that had the advantage of being able to look back on a whole career of childrearing.

Of the nine who responded to my flyer, I chose three men who had what seemed to me to be widely divergent situations. Ethan’s first child was diagnosed in utero with Down’s syndrome, and had numerous medical complications throughout the first years of her life. Chad and Charlie were already caring for their partners children from previous relationships when they had their first biological children, but whereas Charlie reported a generally satisfying experience during a hospital birth, Chad told me that his experience of hospital birth was one of conflict and struggle. The many men I did not choose to participate would, undoubtedly, each have provided me with more fascinating and unique perspectives. Had I been able to include every father who asked to be part of this research I would have. Unfortunately, I felt that I needed to, for the simple sake of staying with a manageable amount of data, limit my study to five participants.

After contacting my five participants, we scheduled meetings. In every case the fathers opted to meet at their homes, although I offered to reserve a private room at Duquesne University. I informed them that these conversations would be recorded so that I could later transcribe and analyze them. I met only once with each father. At the beginning of each session I reviewed my consent form (see Appendix B) with the father and we both signed it. I explained that I would keep the recorded conversations only
long enough to transcribe them, after which I would erase the original recording. We also discussed the issue of anonymity. Surprisingly, each man with who I spoke offered to let me use his real name. Their willingness notwithstanding, I have chosen to give all characters in the conversations pseudonyms, so as to protect the anonymity of those people who are implicated in the conversations. I also altered any identifying information that might lead to a reader’s recognition of anyone mentioned in these conversations.

The conversations were semi-structured insofar as I began each conversation with a set of predetermined areas that I explored with the participants. The format of the actual conversations, however, varied considerably from one participant to the next, depending on which areas each chose to emphasize. In this way our conversations were formal enough to provide some basis for comparison. At the same time, they were flexible enough to allow for deviation into unexpected and unscripted aspects of fathers’ experiences. My questions, which are listed in Appendix C of this paper, focused on three main areas: the meaning of fatherhood for each participant, the father’s experience of pregnancy and preparation for the birth, and finally, the father’s experience of the birth itself. I also gave my participants plenty of opportunity to address any other significant issues they felt we had not touched upon during our conversations.

**Interpreting the Data**

In order to present an account of fathers’ experiences of childbirth in a way that remained faithful both to those “individual and idiosyncratic” experiences as they are lived and to the sociohistorical context out of which they have arisen my method needed
to be able accommodate both variation and similarities. Thus I elected to employ a time-
honored qualitative methodological approach: an empirical-phenomenological inquiry
into fathers’ birth experiences. This approach is best summarized as a “direct analysis of
the psychological meaning of naïve descriptions of personal experiences” (Giorgi, 1985,
p.1). The method I used to analyze and interpret my data was based on Giorgi’s
phenomenological method. Because Giorgi’s work was the basis for my own method,
and since I have adapted his procedures slightly for this dissertation, I will present both
Giorgi’s procedural steps as well as examples from my analysis of my conversation with
Pablo in order to demonstrate how I tailored these steps to fit the needs of this project.

The aim of phenomenological research is to describe human experience as it is
lived by the participants. In reference to Husserl’s maxim “to the things themselves,”
Giorgi suggests that the researcher interested in these human phenomena must “go to the
everyday world where people are living through various phenomena in actual situations”
(p.8). It is in this everyday world that these phenomena are lived through and the “naïve”
descriptions of these experiences are the raw data that, through interpretation, will allow
these experiences to show themselves.

The analysis of the transcribed interviews entails a four-step process that begins
when “one reads the entire description in order to get a general sense of the whole
statement” (Giorgi, 1985, p.10). By reading through the description thoroughly the
researcher begins to understand the general attitude of the narrative. At this point, Giorgi
says, it is crucial that “the general sense grasped after the reading of the text is not
interrogated nor made explicit in any way” (pp.10-11). At this point in the interpretive
process the important point is that the researcher becomes oriented to the “general sense”
of the description. For instance, by reading the transcript of my conversation with Pablo, I began to see that his description of his experience of becoming a father was intimately connected to his belief that approaching the world with a positive, optimistic attitude directly influences his experience of being in the world, and that this general philosophy of life pervaded the entire conversation. Additionally, I saw that Pablo’s understanding of his role as a father was intimately tied to his relationship with his wife, Marie.

Once the description has been read through (several times if necessary) the next step in the interpretation begins. “Once the sense of the whole has been grasped, the researcher goes back to the beginning and reads through the text once more with the specific aim of discriminating ‘meaning units’ from within a psychological perspective and with a focus on the phenomenon being researched” (Giorgi, 1985, p.10). This is necessary because, “since one cannot analyze a whole text simultaneously, one has to break it down into manageable units” (p.11). Giorgi’s “psychological perspective” refers to the attitude with which the researcher approaches the possible meanings inherent in the description. He points out that different meanings will emerge from a text depending on what sort of perspective the reader takes in relation to it. “We are not saying that the meaning units exist in the text as such. They exist only in relation to the attitude and set of the researcher” (p.15). In my reading of the raw transcripts I drew out all of the passages that seemed to reflect my participant’s attitudes toward and experiences of fatherhood. Rather than limiting my focus to the relationship between fathers and childbirth I included everything that revealed any aspect of the father’s experience. I chose to broaden my investigation beyond the scope of the birth event because it became obvious to me as I read the transcripts that in order to understand any one component of
the experience of fatherhood it must be from within the larger context of the totality of the father’s relationships and engagements in the world.

The “meaning units” the researcher seeks to delineate through the second step of the interpretation are by no means an end in themselves. Rather, they mark the beginning of a shift in the researcher’s understanding of the description from an everyday literal grasping of it to a somewhat more refined understanding of the particular psychological significance of certain phrases or remarks. “The meaning units that emerge as a consequence of the analysis are spontaneously perceived discriminations within the subject’s description arrived at when the researcher assumes a psychological attitude toward the concrete description” (Giorgi, 1985, p.11). Here we see that the researcher’s own experience plays an active role in the interpretive process. This is especially important to keep in mind since the possibility of the researcher’s own worldview coloring the interpretation is unavoidable. This apparent threat to the study’s validity (insofar as it precludes the possibility of complete impartiality on the researcher’s part) is controlled for by a series of movements back and forth between the original description and the evolving meaning units that the researcher has begun to pluck from the text. Giorgi describes this method as “the practice of science within the ‘context of discovery’ rather than in the ‘context of verification’” (1985, p.14) and we can take from this the sense that the interest of this sort of research is to provide a description of a human experience that has come about through a process of discovering the psychological meaning of events as they are lived by people. This is significant in its difference from the “science of verification” which would seek to prove the existence of common elements that inhere in every father’s birth experience. Giorgi describes the attitude one
adopts for the sake of discriminating the meaning units as “one of ‘circumscribed indeterminateness’ or ‘empty determinateness.’ This means that certain circumscription, a certain general expectation is established […] but on the other hand, a certain open-endedness is also maintained so that genuine discoveries may ensue” (p.13).

The meaning units, (albeit identified by the researcher) are not stand-alone artifacts that, taken separately, can provide the reader with an understanding of the original description or the experience of which the description is an account. Giorgi argues that, “the meaning units that are constituted by this procedure are understood to be constituents and not elements, following the terminology of Gurwitsch […] A constituent is a part determined in such a way that it is context-laden. An element is a part determined in such a way that its meaning is as much as possible independent of context” (1985, p.14).

In my analysis of my conversation with Pablo I worked methodically from beginning to end, drawing from the text all of the statements that impressed me as being relevant to the issues of fatherhood. Below is an excerpt from our conversation. I have underlined all of the elements that struck me as being meaningfully related to the process of becoming a father.

Pablo: Well, just the levels of awareness that you go through kind of change according to the evolution of the mother. Because the way the months are separated throughout that period, or the periods, you know, the way that the mom experiences different things — internal changes, physical changes of all kinds throughout that period — and you know, for me that’s sort of like a clear … not just evidence, but metaphor about the part of the process that we were at. You know what I mean? So, she was feeling sick. To me that was reflective of how… the kind of realization that we were having at that time, and the kind of acceptance of this birth that we were having at that time and then… I don’t know, things like the belly starts coming out and you start thinking, “Wow, you’re carrying this thing!” And then you get to see what’s in there, and then you know, it all of a sudden — you get to really see that there’s something there, but then all of a sudden it’s kicking. And [laughs], you know what I mean? And as this process is happening, you’re seeing all the internal stages too, of your father, of your growth as a parent. I don’t know if that’s clear or not. But to me, paying attention to Marie, paying attention to her moods, and paying attention to all her development was kind of telling me about what my role
was. You know? I would know exactly what to do. I would know what she needed. And the thing is, I wanted to help because I didn’t have any other way to help, you know? I didn’t have anything else to do. So that was, for me, what the pregnancy time was about. You know, so, I don’t know. Catching up with where I felt I was at, which I mean, while the pregnancy happened… throughout that period I had major, major, radical changes about… everything, for that matter. I mean, my whole perception of the world changed and has continued changing all throughout the development of my child. And now that he’s born, it’s also everything has changed – my perception of the world is completely changed. And I mean, it’s – the whole process happens, I feel like it makes sense how it happens, you know? First you find out about it and it’s like this ethereal concept and you’re like, “Ahh, a baby!” And you imagine this slobbery pile of person and you think, “Oh, I’m a father!” And you think of poopy diapers and high school, er, school. I don’t know. We have such a blurry image, but then, you know, all these changes start happening slowly. And then the birth happens and all these changes are fast! But it feels like, if Jaime had just popped, I wouldn’t have been ready for what is happening. And so I feel like part of that early process of Jaime being about to be born and throughout pregnancy it was about me sort of trying to tap on this rhythm, and trying to feel the development of the birth so that I would get all the right cues that would prepare me to be a father.

Once these constituent units of meaning are culled from the transcribed interviews, the next step in the interpretation commences. “Once ‘meaning units’ have been delineated, the researcher then goes through all of the meaning units and expresses the psychological insight contained in them more directly. This is especially true of the ‘meaning units’ most revelatory of the phenomenon under question” (Giorgi, 1985, p.10). This step, in a way, entails a translation from the everyday language of the raw description into more clearly psychological language. However, unlike the kind of translation that Giorgi promotes, in which the researcher essentially rewrites the participant’s statements in a new and more psychologically oriented language, I chose to keep my participants’ original words and, instead, to cluster my many excerpts into commonly related thematic areas. Below is an example of how I grouped the selected passages from the transcript into thematic clusters:

**Fatherhood beginning to feel real:**

First you find out about it and it’s like this ethereal concept and you’re like, “Ahh, a baby!”
The belly starts coming out and you start thinking, “Wow, you’re carrying this thing!” And then you get to see what’s in there, and then you know, it all of a sudden – you get to really see that there’s something there, but then all of a sudden it’s kicking.

**Changes in the father in relation to the mother:**

The levels of awareness that you go through kind of change according to the evolution of the mother.

The mom experiences different things – internal changes, physical changes of all kinds throughout that period.

**Role of the father emerging in his relationship with the mother:**

To me, paying attention to Marie, paying attention to her moods, and paying attention to all her development was kind of telling me about what my role was.

I wanted to help because I didn’t have any other way to help, you know? I didn’t have anything else to do. So that was, for me, what the pregnancy time was about.

As this process is happening, you’re seeing all the internal stages too, of your father, of your growth as a parent.

**Process of becoming a father through a perceptual shift:**

While the pregnancy happened… throughout that period I had major, major, radical changes about… everything, for that matter. I mean, my whole perception of the world changed and has continued changing all throughout the development of my child. And now that he’s born, it’s also everything has changed – my perception of the world is completely changed.

If Jaime had just popped, I wouldn’t have been ready for what is happening. And so I feel like part of that early process of Jaime being about to be born and throughout pregnancy it was about me sort of trying to tap on this rhythm, and trying to feel the development of the birth so that I would get all the right cues that would prepare me to be a father.

At this point my understanding of the original texts invariably began to take on added or different dimensions. I needed to reflect back on the raw description as I attempted to draw out the psychological implications held within. This looking-back had the effect of bringing even greater illumination to the meaning units and their subsequent transformation into expressions of the psychological insight they contain. And, conversely, the process of discriminating these units made my understanding of the original text deeper and more complex. This cyclical movement between the two is known as the “hermeneutic circle.” Giguere quotes Kvale’s remark that interpretation
practiced in this fashion, “goes beyond the immediately given and enriches the understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interrelations in the text, extending its meaning” (in Giguere, 2001, p.54). It is through this hermeneutic circle that, with an enhanced understanding of both the whole and its constituents, I was able to draw out the themes that emerged from fathers’ narratives.

These themes, using terminology borrowed from Giorgi and Giguere, are considered annotated interpretations. In Giguere’s usage, these annotated interpretations can be divided into the individual and common varieties. Individual themes are themes that can be said to reflect the psychological dynamics present in one father’s account of his experience (and not necessarily reflected in other fathers’ accounts). Common themes, on the other hand, are those insights or revelations into an experience that appear in multiple participants’ narratives. These common themes, if present, can be said to reflect the shared experiential components of this event. In other words, the common themes will be those experiences that emerge across several or all of the accounts.

It is tempting to follow Giorgi’s characterization of these common themes as being representative of general existential structures but I feel it would be prudent to refrain from making that inferential leap. Instead, I have considered the common themes that emerged in the interpretation as belonging to the fathers with whom I spoke, without assuming that all fathers everywhere must share these experiences. My reluctance to ascribe to these common themes an ontological status merely reflects my own belief that it is impossible to say with any certainty whether or not a shared experience is the result of the influence of a shared cultural and social background or of a shared human condition. Still, Giorgi’s treatment of individual and general themes (and their translation
to situated and general structures) is interesting and useful for clarifying and delineating the phenomenon under scrutiny. He says of this distinction, “The specific description of the situated structure remains more faithful to the concrete subject and specific situation whereas the general description of the situated structure tries as much as possible to depart from the specifics to communicate the most general meaning of the phenomenon” (1985, p.20). For my purposes, I will amend Giorgi’s statement by saying that the general description of the situated structure tries as much as possible to depart from the specifics to communicate the most general meaning of the phenomenon for the participants in this study.

The fourth and final step in this component of my method involved bringing together the themes and integrating them into a cohesive and comprehensive description of fathers’ experiences of their children’s birth. “Finally, the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject’s experience” (Giorgi, 1985, p.10). At this point in my own analysis, in a manner very similar to Giorgi’s final analytical procedure, I brought together all of the thematic clusters that consisted of the various statements taken directly from the transcripts. I organized these clusters according to general fatherhood issues and birth-specific issues. I then wrote each father’s story using these organized thematic clusters in such a way as to create an easily readable and consistent narrative structure that I could apply in each story. By keeping my participants’ original language intact and simply reorganizing their words according to the emergent themes, I was able to craft narratives for each father that reflected the psychological dynamics of becoming and being fathers in such a way that the meanings of certain aspects of their experiences began to show themselves while the
particular ways in which each man described his experience remained his own. The following is a short example of how I brought together thematically related material from different areas of my conversation with Pablo in this narrative structure:

In contrast to what Pablo perceives to be his own father’s resistance to a collaborative approach to parenting, Pablo told me that his own style of fathering is strongly influenced by his relationship with his wife, Marie. According to Pablo, in order for a father to be fully effective, he needs the mother to be his “accomplice.” For Pablo this is especially important in the first years of a child’s life when she or he is dependent on the mother. He told me that he feels that it is important to understand, “that the father is always a complementary figure to the mother.” When I asked him to say more about this Pablo explained to me his understanding of the parents’ roles and how they pertain to a new baby. “Your mother brings you into the world and she’s your protector and it’s all sort of emotional energy and it’s like… and then, you know, I imagine later in life when you start having different kinds of concerns many times your father’s the only person who can help you with that.”

Before moving on to the stories, I will describe in more detail how I used my own participation in the conversations as a means of keeping my project rigorously self-reflexive. In order to achieve this reflexivity in research Walsh advocates a step beyond those outlined by Giorgi. He suggests, “human science methods must incorporate one more pass through the hermeneutic circle. This pass should entail scrutiny of research results as described by a particular researcher for what they reveal about that researcher and his or her vantage point on the phenomenon” (Walsh, 1995, p.337). In the same article, Walsh describes the procedures that make researcher reflexivity possible. The first procedure, to be undertaken prior to the conversations with participants, involves an intentional and thorough disclosure of the researcher’s own a priori assumptions (1995, p.341). This step helps ensure “a clear articulation, for both the researcher and the research community, of the conscious aspects of the horizon through which a particular project is initiated” (1995, p.341). My strategy for this disclosure was to respond to my own research questions (these responses can be found in Appendix D).
Following the process of interpreting the conversations and making sense of them are two more procedures that contribute to a project’s reflexivity. One, researcher reflection, entails “the researcher reflecting on the experience of conducting the research [...] the researcher can describe the ‘momentary experiences and associations’ [...] that occurred during the processes of handling and sense-making” (Walsh, 1995, p.341). The next and final procedure Walsh discusses is the explication of implicit assumptions. In this step, “either the researcher or colleagues can scrutinize results in light of the researcher’s own reflections and acknowledgment of a priori assumptions” (p.341). The aim of this step is to seek “connections among presuppositions, emergent reflections, and the phenomenon as articulated by the researcher” (p.341). In order to provide for myself and my readers a sense of how my own approach to this topic influenced my research, I have included, at the end of my discussion, a reflection section in which I bring my results into dialogue with my own responses to my research questions.

Using Walsh’s procedures helped to ensure that my project remained as true as possible to my aim of describing fathers’ experiences as they emerge within a research context both by making explicit my own approach as a researcher (complete with presuppositions and biases) and by providing a means for distinguishing between what I hear and what fathers are saying. One final note regarding this aspect of my project: Walsh points out that these procedures are not “strategies to expurgate ‘bias’ in order to ‘purify’ research results. Instead, they heed Giorgi’s call to make explicit whatever one can” (1995, p.342).
My intention in this project was to describe particular fathers’ experiences of being present at their children’s births. In order to make sense of the narratives I obtained from fathers I interpreted them in the light of the explicit and implicit themes inherent in them. I also interpreted them in relation to the cultural discourses that surround and penetrate the narratives, with a special emphasis on the relationship between the themes that emerged and the issue of identity. I hoped to write a dissertation that is valuable to the participants by inviting them to bring their thoughts and feelings to language, perhaps for the first time. I hoped to write a dissertation that is valuable to me both in terms of being a major scholarly endeavor and because I too am a father. Finally, I hoped to write a dissertation that is valuable to all fathers by drawing attention to an area of human experience that has heretofore been sadly neglected. However, I did not wish to reduce fathers’ experiences to one story. On the contrary, I hoped to present an account of fathers’ experiences and the culture that fosters them as the complex phenomena they are. “Released from some of the constraints of reductionist thinking and the imperative to generalize to a universal explanation (discourse), we can talk about multiverses, or the many possible stories, of fatherhood from a social constructionist perspective” (Dienhart, 1998, p.11).
In this chapter I will present the situated narratives of the five fathers with whom I spoke. These narratives were derived through my application of the aforementioned interpretive process, using the transcribed conversations between the fathers and me. Each of the narratives is presented in essentially two main parts. The first part deals with each father’s perspective on the nature of fatherhood: the role of the father, their reflections on their relationships with their own fathers, their feelings about their relationships with their partners, and so on. The second part of each narrative deals specifically with the fathers’ experiences and reflections on the pregnancies and births of their children. Although the emphasis on each part varies from narrative to narrative, the general structure is consistent throughout. I chose to structure the narratives in this way for two reasons. First, I felt that organizing all of these narratives according to a common structure would make it simpler to assess each father’s story in relation to the others. In other words, a common structure makes for better consistency from one narrative to the next. My other reason for organizing the narratives as I have has to do with the thematic content of all of my participants’ stories. In every case, although each man told his story in his own way and each account organized itself uniquely, there were essentially two main foci: fatherhood as a social phenomenon and fathers’ concrete experiences of pregnancy and birth. Thus it was useful to organize these narratives as I did both for the sake of structural consistency across all five stories as well as for thematic coherency.

One more issue to discuss before beginning the stories concerns my process of deciding what of my participants’ accounts to include in these narratives and what to
leave out. I have already described in my method discussion my process (based on Giorgi’s phenomenological method) of distinguishing meaningful units and explicating their psychological implications. What is left is to explain is what, precisely, I chose to focus on in these stories and what I chose to disregard.

In each transcript I began by isolating every passage that struck me as having some significance to this study. At this point, my measure for what qualified as “significant” was very broad. Essentially, any statement that appeared to me to resonate with my participants’ emotional or psychological experience was included. From the many passages and quotes that I drew from my transcripts, I then grouped them according to thematic content and tried to find the most representative selections from these groupings to include in the narratives. Although I took pains to ensure that I did not leave any stone unturned in my search of the transcripts for meaningful statements, it is possible that there were aspects of the conversations that, while being meaningful for the participants, I overlooked because they did not strike me as particularly significant. Having completed this paper, and looking back at my transcripts and narratives, however, I did not find any glaring omissions.

**Pablo’s Story**

Pablo is in his early twenties. He grew up in South America with his mother and moved to the United States to attend University in his late teens. Upon coming to the United States, Pablo moved in with his father. Pablo is an artist and the same philosophy that guides his drawing and painting seemed to me to underlie his approach to parenting.
During our conversation Pablo was very open and talkative. He seemed to take immense joy in speaking of his wife and their son who, at the time of the conversation, was four months old. Our conversation was easily the longest and most involved of the five I conducted. Although we spoke at great length, the discussion revolved around only a few major themes. In a nutshell, these themes included the father’s isolation in society, the importance of a collaborative parenting effort between the father and the mother, Pablo’s sense of “not-knowing” (and his enduring optimism in the fact of it), his desire for positive input from his community, the importance of the father’s role as “director” of the birth setting, and his fear of not being “enough” for his son.

I very much enjoyed our conversation. I was surprised to discover that the differences between our cultural backgrounds did not appear to me to play too large a role in how both of us perceive fatherhood and childbirth. Obviously, this does not imply that cultural differences do not exist or do not need to be taken into account. However, in this particular case, I did not find any reason to believe that Pablo’s cultural background or my own made it more difficult for us to establish a strong rapport or to understand each other. That being said, one thing that stands out in my conversation with Pablo in contrast to my other conversations has to do with his account of the birth. In every other story, the father spoke of the intense emotional response he felt in his first encounter with his child. This is conspicuously absent from Pablo’s story. When I reread our conversation to see if I had simply missed it I discovered that he had not, in fact, actually described his son’s first appearance. To be sure, Pablo told me all about the pregnancy and the moments leading up to parturition, and he spoke at length about his philosophy of fathering and of life in general. But at the point in his account that his son would have
been just coming into the world, our focus shifted to another topic. I cannot say whether this shift was motivated by Pablo for whatever reason, or if it was simply a result of my own inexperience as an interviewer that I did not recognize that that part of the story was not yet finished before I moved on to the next topic.

**What Makes a Father?**

Our conversation began with Pablo’s statement that he feels that fathers often, “think that they’re alone in this crazy journey.” As our discussion went on he went on to say that he feels that fathers today do not get nearly enough guidance from previous generations and that there is very little available in terms of a forum for fathers to speak with one another about their experiences.

I asked Pablo to tell me about his own perspective on fatherhood. He responded, “I couldn’t tell you that I have a clear idea of what fatherhood means.” He went on to tell me that much of his own childhood was marked by the absence of his own father and that not having a clear and constant model of fathering has made it difficult for Pablo to know the father’s role. According to Pablo, although he did not grow up with his father, he did have some experience of being fathered. His relationship with his stepfather was very positive. “My step dad, Joachim, he’s awesome, and he’s a father to me, you know what I mean? I grew up with him and even though he has two kids he was willing to take me like one of his own.”

As a child Pablo also had contact with his father, but not as a stable presence in the home. Pablo told me that his father’s visits gave him a skewed understanding both of what a father does and who this particular man was. “I did have this kind of idealized
figure of a father, you know what I mean? This guy who lives far away who only comes every once in a while and who would give me presents – I never had a bad time with my dad.” He went on to say that this somewhat mythical figure his father came to represent for him was not the reality that he would later discover through living with him as a teen. Of his childhood experience of his father Pablo said, “what I didn’t know was that there were all these other layers that I would never experience for not living the daily life with him.”

Having lived with his father and experiencing more of his father’s “layers” has led Pablo to understand that he and his father do not share much of a philosophy of fathering. For instance, while Pablo hopes to be a friend to his son, he told me, “I think my dad, for example, has a view of fatherhood as a sort of unbreakable hierarchical barrier where he is the father figure and I am the son and never will we be able to communicate one-to-one.”

In contrast to what Pablo perceives to be his own father’s resistance to a collaborative approach to parenting, Pablo told me that his own style of fathering is strongly influenced by his relationship with his wife, Marie. According to Pablo, in order for a father to be fully effective, he needs the mother to be his “accomplice.” For Pablo this is especially important in the first years of a child’s life when she or he is dependent on the mother. He told me that he feels that it is important to understand, “that the father is always a complementary figure to the mother.” When I asked him to say more about this Pablo explained to me his understanding of the parents’ roles and how they pertain to a new baby. “Your mother brings you into the world and she’s your protector and it’s all sort of emotional energy and it’s like… and then, you know, I imagine later in life when
you start having different kinds of concerns many times your father’s the only person who can help you with that.”

In effect, Pablo seemed to view the roles of the mother and the father as oscillating along a continuum. As their child grows older, the parents’ roles and responsibilities change accordingly. The mother is initially the parent on whom most of the responsibility of parenting rests. This belief is borne out in Pablo’s own experience with his wife and son. He told me,

I see Marie and myself as very close in terms of our mission, you know, and I think that I always tell her that I wish I had boobies because right now it’s real hard for me to… she’s like… I can only settle Jaime down to some degree but then after that I’m hopeless […] there will be a time later when I’m the only one that can help him in a different kind of realm.

Along with working together to provide for their son’s changing needs, Pablo told me that his relationship with Marie is important in terms of their own processes of self-discovery. “Marie, to me, represents a lot of the aspects of myself that I haven’t explored and vice-versa […] we sort of remind each other of who we are and who we want to be.”

This theme of mutual discovery and transformation appeared several times during our conversation and seemed to me to be a fundamental aspect of Pablo’s philosophy of life.

Preparing For a Baby

One aspect of Pablo’s story that I found particularly impressive was the extent to which he seemed to have contemplated and prepared for the birth and his approaching transformation into a father. That being said, however, it was striking to me that, ultimately, Pablo did not appear to come to any clear understanding of his situation beyond recognizing his own ignorance of what was to come. At one point he said to me,
“I just didn’t know what would teach me how to be a father but I figured what would teach me to be a father is the experience of every moment.”

Pablo told me that he and Marie spent a great deal of time early in their pregnancy trying to consider their situation and determine whether or not they were ready for a baby. Ultimately, the couple’s love for each other and hope for their future seemed to be the key factor, rather than material or financial solvency. Pablo said, “we did think about the practical considerations, and we did think of, ‘Can we do this?’ You know what I mean? But another part of me which is more strong in me and is more important to me is the kind of instinctive part that says, ‘All you need is love.’” At another point Pablo reiterated this sentiment, saying, “there were practical questions, but there was also what to me are the big questions. For example, ‘do I have the love and the energy to give to this person?’”

Pablo did admit that the “practical considerations” did trouble him. But he assured me that the important issues for him were much more about how he would interact and connect with a new baby. He said to me,

When I imagined myself being a father I didn’t imagine myself working in an office to pay bills and figure out all that. I mean, I’m figuring that out now, but what I did picture myself was sort of like being with a person, holding someone in my arms, playing, talking to someone, you know what I mean, teaching someone something, traveling, all the things that I have to share and I think that’s what keeps me calm at nights when we don’t know how we’re going to pay next month’s rent.

During the pregnancy, Pablo again discovered that he and his father did not see eye-to-eye. When Pablo told his father that he and Marie were going to have a baby, his father replied, “You’ve signed your independence, boy.” However, this also marked a turning point in the father-son dynamic between Pablo and his father. Pablo told me that
he began to recognize in their relationship, “the archetypal image of the father becoming a grandfather, the son becoming a father and this dichotomy of father and son being kicked up a notch.” For Pablo, the significance of relating to his father from this new position was that, “for the first time my dad and I from now on could approach each other from an adulthood point of view, and that he could finally listen to me for the first time as an adult.”

I asked Pablo what sort of advice he received about preparing to become a new father. He said,

My dad didn’t give me any good advice at that time. He was kind of poking on my weakness at the time, you know. He was like, “Well, you don’t have money… What are you going to do about this, what are you going to do about this, how are you going to pay this bill, and how are you going to do this, and you don’t even blah blah blah, and you…” Do you know what I mean? And so I had to cut contact with him for a certain period of time where I needed to prepare myself for […] birth.

It was clear to me that, although Pablo was able to laugh about it during our conversation, he was frustrated by what he perceived to be a lot of negativity coming from his father concerning their birth. About that, Pablo said, “the last thing that I needed was someone undermining my optimism about my situation. Undermining my clear mind. I think that worrying like that can really sort of limit your intellectual capacity. And emotional capacity.”

Pablo told me that he felt that much of what his father said was calculated to frighten or worry him. For instance, when Pablo and Marie told Pablo’s father that they were planning on having the baby at home, they were met with skepticism and concern. Pablo remembered that his father was, “worried, scared, angry, and when he started getting a sense of the way Marie and I were handling things he, in the beginning, was
kind of intimidated. You know, when I told him we were not having a hospital birth, that we were having a home birth, he was like, ‘Are you willing to risk your wife’s life, your son’s life[?]’” As it turned out, the birth went very well. This surprised Pablo’s father. Pablo told me, “when we pulled it off, when we pulled the whole thing off and everything was so radiant and beautiful and everything magically worked out, he couldn’t believe it.”

Conversely, Pablo found his friends to be a source of inspiration and support. “In terms of advice at that time what helped me was to have people, instead of saying, ‘Oh my god, having a homebirth is scary. You guys better freak out,’ [both laugh] I was having from my friends things like, ‘You might want to read this book, it talks about a lot of cool things you can do and it also mentions things that could go wrong so that you’d revise them.’”

Again, as I have mentioned above, the most important factor for Pablo in terms of preparing for the birth was his collaboration with Marie. He told me that they were both involved in every step of the planning. “Together we made the birth plan, which means we both decided who was and who was not going to be there the moment of the birth. We both decided what we were and were not doing at the moment of the birth. It was a very shared process and I was involved with her to the most minimal detail.” He went on to say that he greatly appreciated the fact that Marie made this collaboration possible. Pablo realized that the situation could have been different. Marie could have been less willing to let Pablo be such an active participant in the planning and preparation. He told me that they worked through all of their concerns cooperatively, even when they disagreed. “At points we went through a few arguments where I interfered a little bit
with decisions she was making where I was like, ‘I want to say something about that.’
And sometimes we’d have a disagreement on the birth plan and I felt comfortable saying,
‘No Marie, I think we shouldn’t have our birth like that.’ I felt comfortable saying that
because I know that my role is important, but also because she gave me that comfort.”

Pablo also told me that he felt that his own transformation into a father was
largely directed by the changes he perceived in Marie. “The levels of awareness that you
go through kind of change according to the evolution of the mother […] as this process is
happening, you’re seeing all the internal stages too, of your father, of your growth as a
parent.” Pablo was eager to be for Marie whatever she needed him to be. “I wanted to
help because I didn’t have any other way to help, you know? I didn’t have anything else
to do. So that was, for me, what the pregnancy time was about.”

**Being at Home(birth)**

Pablo’s story of the birth itself began with a description of how he perceives the
nature of reality. He told me a lot throughout the course of our conversation about his
understanding of the interactive quality of the world and how each person affects the
world around him or her. For instance, he said, “Through having experienced a world
where you are responsible for the reality around you, I realized I needed to put myself in
a kind of extremely conscious and harmonious space for this birth, you know? I feel like
if I would have freaked out during the birth, things could have gone wrong.”

Pablo told me that he took his responsibilities at the birth very seriously. Even
though Pablo was not sure exactly what he would be called upon to do, he was
determined to do what he could. He reported that, all through the birth, he was, “helping
however I can because basically, at that point, a father could feel like there’s nothing for him to do, you know what I mean? But there is, there is.” Especially important for Pablo was how the emotional dispositions of those around them at the birth influenced Marie’s experience. He felt that monitoring this factor was one of his primary responsibilities. “Everything that Marie’s going through can be either really awesome or really traumatic, you know what I mean? And I think that the support of the father at that time is essential.”

At the birth, Pablo realized that Marie needed him to serve as her connection to the rest of the world so that she could concentrate on the birth and know that everything else was taken care of. “I felt I had a lot of responsibility as the father. I was also kind of in charge of who came in and out of the house. I was also in charge of monitoring the volume level, and I was kind of a director in a way because Marie is having her very intimate moment and she doesn’t want to have to deal with… anything.” This task included being aware of Marie and responding with her to her changes. “I realized that whatever emotions and thoughts I was having were directly influential on the kind of things that were surrounding me and how things were happening around me and so one of the things that I had realized that I needed to do is focus my mind in my breathing and focus in the well-being of Marie.”

Pablo discovered that his role was even more complex insofar as he needed to keep himself calm no matter what might happen. “I felt very much like a protector, and I also felt like an emergency, an emergency specialist. So that I had put myself in the kind of mindset that I was ready for anything to happen at any time […] I wanted to be, you know… everyone can faint and everyone can freak out, but I’m going to be the one that,
you know, will maintain that kind of rationality.” He told me that knowing that he was there, taking responsibility for managing any potential crises, was very comforting to Marie. “That was a big thing that she could count on me for the security that I’d be there to say, ‘We’ll be fine.’” According to Pablo, this was not all that difficult a role for him to perform. Rather, it is how he tends to approach most situations. “I never, ever pause to feed those worries and I think she counted on me for that. To just kind of keep ourselves hopeful and strong and not fall into the temptation of feeling scared and the temptation of feeling like we’re not doing the right thing.”

Pablo told me that his calm and steady presence was important at the birth not only for his own state of mind but also for Marie’s. He said, “I think it helped Marie so much, too […] Marie was able to relax, she was able to breathe better, so many things.” Since Marie was able to focus on the birth, Pablo felt that he was also freer to pay attention to what was happening and that this, in turn, better informed him as to what was needed of him. “To me, paying attention to Marie, paying attention to her moods, and paying attention to all her development was kind of telling me about what my role was.”

I asked Pablo to describe the birth scene for me and he said,

The birth was smooth and fast. By the time the midwife, Lois, got to our house, Marie was eight centimeters dilated, which is almost ready to go. And she dilated in no time, and… And then she started having contractions and I was right behind her and putting pressure on her back – it was what hurt her the most. And at that point I could not put pressure on her back, basically, so she had a contraction and I would be there pushing, and then the contraction would be over and everyone would kind of scatter and run, get this, get that, get this and get ready here, get ready here, until we were all ready. And then I was just sitting; sitting there with her and the contractions got stronger […] got more continuous and longer and more intense and I was right there with her. And I was putting a towel of cold water on her forehead, and having her take little sips of water, and having her eat some Popsicles, and taking pictures, and I would breathe in her ear a lot so that she would breathe, too, you know?
Just a reminder sometimes that, you know, when you have someone sitting next to you going like [inhales deeply through his nose and exhales through his mouth with an ahhhh sound], it makes you remember, “Oh yeah. I have lungs, and I can breathe.” And that, I think, was important.

Meanwhile, Pablo was also participating in the birth by doing all of the things he had decided would make the experience more satisfying for him. “I was looking around me. And I was being aware of Marie’s face, and paying attention to the other sounds in the room, and making sure there was cold and warm water, and making, you know… Taking photographs.”

Despite the obvious pleasure Pablo experienced in describing the birth for me, he returned for a moment to the theme of wishing that he had a more direct role in the birth. “I think that a big thing that must have been going on somewhat subconsciously in my head was, ‘I want to be going through what you’re going through. I want to share every moment of what you’re feeling because I know that this baby is as much mine as it is your and I wish that we could share the pain.’”

When I asked Pablo about Marie’s experience of his role and participation at the birth he responded, “I felt like she expected of me much less than what I was doing. So I think she was always really grateful.” He went on to say that since they had made sure to understand what they each expected of each other and of themselves, there were not many surprises during the birth. “From the beginning she wanted me to be there. She knew that I was going to be with her, right there, the whole time. And basically that’s how it was. We had an agreement that I would be there for her for anything that she needed. And that I would also be doing my own thing, taking pictures and making the house smell nice, or doing whatever I needed to do.” The most important thing that Marie expected from Pablo, he said, was that he would, “be open to any kind of change
that she would want to go through at the time of the birth [...] that was part of the deal, explicit from the beginning, was that I would, I was expected to sort of give input and help out and everything, but be open to any kind of change that would be according to Marie’s mood for the project.”

Looking back on the birth, Pablo realized that they probably would not have had such a good experience if they had not had so much support from their friends. In fact, Pablo believes that they might not have even considered homebirth if they had been alone during their decision making process.

We were lucky that we have the sort of community who’s informed about birthing, and sort of alternative ways of birthing [...] alternative to the majority of birthing that I think happens at this point. But I feel like, if I would have gone from scratch, I would have said, “Let’s go to the hospital.” You know? [...] I would have not known how to do it – yeah. I think that having a lot of people to support us and sort of convince us of the truth, which is that many times this method can be much more safe, and much more healthy, and just better.

Reflections on Becoming a Father

At the time of our conversation, Pablo had only been a father for several months. Still, he has clearly thought a lot about his role in his son’s life and what having a child means for him and Marie. We spent a great deal of the conversation talking about his hopes and expectations for his son. What stands out most for me about Pablo’s story was not just his repeated assertion that he simply does not know what to expect, but also his palpable excitement over the possibility of discovering what the future holds. He told me, “I feel like Jaime’s not going to stop me from doing anything, but if anything he’s going to be inspiration [...] I imagine him dancing with Marie, playing music with me,
making artwork, and writing with us, you know – doing the things that we do as, as a family.”

I asked him about his expectations about learning how he relates to his son and he responded, “I see fatherhood as this very dynamic thing; I think I’m going to meet him and we’re going to find out how we relate.” In keeping with the prevalent theme of optimism that ran through our entire discussion, Pablo told me, “His personality is something that escapes my knowledge in a way and so… But I also have this kind of innate feeling that if I just do it the best I can and try to be the best I can be then it’s going to be fine.”

Pablo also insisted that it was important that he remember that Jaime will have his own perspective and his own native wisdom. “We’re all human; I’m not going to be any wiser than him, I think. If anything, maybe I’ll have more experience […] I want it to be a friendship.” In terms of his role as a guide for his son, Pablo said, “I do think he’s an empty vessel, full of opportunity, but what I’m going to do is going to try and, you know, encourage him in any direction that he’s going and all directions too.”

Pablo recounted a period during the pregnancy during which his perspective on the world and his part began to change. The birth of his son brought these changes to a head. He said to me, “throughout that period I had major, major, radical changes about… everything, for that matter. I mean, my whole perception of the world changed and has continued changing all throughout the development of my child. And now that he’s born, it’s also everything has changed – my perception of the world is completely changed.” I asked Pablo to explain what he meant in terms of the changes he was describing. He told
me that the process of pregnancy and birth were transformative for him in that what was at first only a vague idea of what it means to be a father became a reality.

The whole process happens, I feel like it makes sense how it happens, you know? First you find out about it and it’s like this ethereal concept and you’re like, “Ahh, a baby!” And you imagine this slobbery pile of person and you think, “Oh, I’m a father!” And you think of poopy diapers and high school, er, school. I don’t know. We have such a blurry image, but then, you know, all these changes start happening slowly. And then the birth happens and all these changes are fast! But it feels like, if Jaime had just popped, I wouldn’t have been ready for what is happening. And so I feel like part of that early process of Jaime being about to be born and throughout pregnancy it was about me sort of trying to tap on this rhythm, and trying to feel the development of the birth so that I would get all the right cues that would prepare me to be a father.

A surprising moment for me occurred when, at what I expected to be the end of the conversation, Pablo pointed out that we had not talked at all about fear. Pablo had several things to say on this topic. For instance, he told me, “even though I’m an optimist I do have fears as a father, and there are a lot of things that I fear, that I don’t know what to expect. And I try to keep my way of thinking open so that I can have rational fears and not overflow myself with worry. But I guess one of my big fears is, having had this fatherhood event happen to me when I haven’t fully developed myself as an adult.” I found it interesting that the same thing that Pablo was confident about in terms of his approach to his own life was a cause for concern as it applied to his ability to be a father to his son. When I asked him about this, he clarified his feelings by saying, “I don’t know who I am yet. And so that’s one of the big concerns, and I guess that’s every father’s concern. ‘What do I give my child that is best?’ How can we do that? And I don’t know if there is an ultimate answer to that, but many times my fear comes from thinking that I’m doing great but one day I might find out that I was lacking on a certain front and my child is suffering from that.”
Ultimately, Pablo’s fears (at least, those that we spoke about) can be characterized as future-oriented. In other words, Pablo seemed to worry most not about providing for his son day-to-day, but rather that his will have failed Jaime in some way that he will only discover when it is too late.

I think what is hard for me is to think of what my child could criticize about me for what I didn’t give him […] You can only do it as you’re going, and so many times you look back and you say, “Oh, there are certain things that I said that maybe I should have said a different way.” Or sometimes you’re in a bad mood and you say something that, without realizing it, you’ve changed this child’s experience forever, and it’s a very delicate subject matter that you want to try and do your best at.

He told me that he feels unsure about how he can be a good model for his son when he himself has not yet fully come into his own adulthood. “I feel like I’m still dealing with finding my manhood in this world, finding my hero, finding my role. And I’m afraid many times that I won’t be sufficient in providing something for him since I haven’t provided it for myself.”

Fears notwithstanding, however, Pablo was still optimistic at the end of our conversation. He told me that it is important for him that he feels like he is challenging himself to live the kind of life that he feels in his heart to be the correct one. According to Pablo, his optimism is founded upon the evidence in his current situation that this is the proper way for him to approach the world. “I want to think that I took every single chance possible and stepped on every single risky spot so that I could do what I wanted to do all throughout my life. And I have been. I have a beautiful apartment, a beautiful wife, a beautiful group of friends, community, beautiful child. I’ve been doing my music. I’ve been doing my painting.”
Ethan’s Story

Ethan is a Caucasian man in his early thirties. He has two children, a daughter and a son. He is a homebuilder and a graduate student studying History. We spoke mainly about his daughter, who was his first child. After our conversation was over, Ethan told me that he had surprised himself by spending so much time talking about Jenny because he had assumed prior to our meeting that we would spend most of the time discussing his relationship with his son, Sam.

Upon reflection, my conversation with Ethan was both the easiest and the most difficult to conduct. It was very easy as far as interviews go because, from the beginning, Ethan was willing and eager to tell me about his experience of the birth of his daughter. As soon as I began to record the conversation, Ethan began to tell his story, and he continued with very little prompting and questions from me, for over an hour. It was clear to me throughout the entire conversation that Ethan wanted his experience to be known. At the same time, his telling of the difficulties he and his partner had to struggle with made me feel at times sad, at times shocked. I found myself wondering whether I could have dealt with such a challenging set of circumstances even half so well as they seemed to. My overall experience of this conversation was very positive. I learned a lot about the man speaking with me and quickly developed a deep respect for the fortitude sometimes required in the process of becoming and being a father.

On Fatherhood

I asked Ethan what the concept of fatherhood means to him and he replied, “I’ve never known my father. I’ve met him like twice. So father to me is more than this idea
of this heavenly father or something outside of a tangible father, like ‘oh I’ll look like
that; that’s my place in the world.’ I’ve never seen it that way [...] Fatherhood’s never
had a face on it, like someone might have with their father.” He went on to describe
fatherhood in terms of a necessary aspect of existence: “For me it’s always had this really
spiritual kind of feeling. I feel like the world works like you have fathers, you have
mothers, and you have children, and everything kind of flows around that.”

It was apparent to me throughout the course of our conversation that Ethan
considered the relationship between the father and the mother as an integral component
of parenting. For instance, he told me that, “being a good father is about the most
important thing you can do, other than being a good husband. I mean, you have to be a
good husband to be a good father. You should try your best to be both of those. And it’s
one of the most important things you can do in life. To have and raise children. And
what it’s about, I guess, I’m still figuring out.”

In terms of the father’s role in the formation of his child’s personality, Ethan told
me that he feels that it is important to recognize the fluidity of the boundary between
parents and their children. He related to me his experience of raising his son:

I can’t take credit for his personality, but I can sure take credit for
providing the things that he needs to grow as a person the best way I can,
you know. And I guess that’s part of it; it’s just being a good facilitator.
I’ve heard people say that parenthood isn’t friendship, but I feel like I’m a
friend to my child, like he can ask me a question and I don’t always have
to give him the “father” answer.

Ethan told me that much of his own childhood was marked by the absence of a
father, and that that had an influence on how he takes up his role as a father to his own
children. He said, “I had a stepfather that my mom divorced when I was twelve, and then
he wasn’t my father anymore. And then she remarried when I was, like, twenty. So from
the time I was like eleven or twelve until I was twenty I didn’t have a father in my life.

[...] I feel like I’m partially without an inheritance, not having a father.” That being said, however, Ethan did acknowledge that he was not completely without positive male influences in his youth. “My grandfather… I’d stay with him and I loved it. I would stay up at his house and read books. Yeah. He definitely inspired me. He’d always pull you aside and give you the talks.”

Still, Ethan told me that he was essentially fatherless at home, and that gave him a somewhat limited experience of the world growing up. “I feel like not growing up with a father I only got the one side sometimes. You know what I mean, like what the mother was going to do. And mothers aren’t willing to do as much without someone helping them.” Ethan went on to say that fathering his own children has allowed him not only to recognize that lack in his own life, but also to make up for it through fathering his children. “I feel like I was missing that and I feel like I’m indulging in it now, with both of my children. And I’m kind of giving it back to myself. Yeah, I feel like I’m fathering myself in some ways.”

One statement Ethan made had to do with his own background and how it relates to the backgrounds of both his daughter’s mother and his son’s mother.

I look at Carrie and Hanna, and both of them didn’t have fathers that were around so much, as a positive role model. But both their mothers were, and I think they both took a lot from their mothers. And their mothers had these like super roles as being the sole provider. And I think in some ways it’s interesting because then I picked women like them and my mother was like that. And so sometimes in both relationships it’s been women that aren’t necessarily sure where I fit as being a father. And I’m not sure either, so I guess it takes a little more work.

One aspect of this account that I found particularly interesting was that it suggested to me that perhaps Ethan had entered into relationships with women who did not already have
clearly defined ideas of the father’s role in order to more easily explore his own
developing fatherhood without coming into conflict with his partners’ assumptions and
expectations. When I made this observation, Ethan responded by saying, “Oh yeah,
totally! In both of them my exploration was great. I feel it’s one of the most important things I’ve done, being a father.” Ethan’s final thought on the role and meaning of the father was this: “I think it’s important to raise up children that have been fathered well.”

It seemed to me that Ethan feels strongly that fathers are necessary for the creation of well-rounded children. His admission to feeling left “without an inheritance” by the absence of a father during his childhood made his own story that much more poignant for me insofar as he described for me a situation that demanded all he could give as a father and more.

The Pregnancy

Ethan and his partner, Hanna, did not plan to conceive a child, but as Ethan told me, they were happy when they discovered they were pregnant. As his story unfolded, however, it became apparent why theirs “seemed like an abnormal situation.” Ethan recalled, “I can remember being very happy and playful at the sonogram.” But shortly upon seeing the first images of their developing baby on the monitor, the nurse’s apprehension suggested to them the possibility of a problem. After conferring with someone outside of their room, the nurse returned and informed them that there was a possibility that their child may have Down’s syndrome. This news, coming as it did in the middle of their “excitement and anticipation,” was a shock.
Ethan told me that, at first, it was difficult for him to know how to take the news. “Maybe growing up mostly fatherless – you know, I had nowhere to put the information. On the spot I definitely couldn’t file it anywhere [...] sad, I guess, is how I felt about it.”

More tests only served to make this possibility seem even more likely to be the case and Ethan and Hanna’s pregnancy was suddenly transformed from their own happy experience into a confusion of specialists and tests. About this shift in their situation Ethan said, “… From that point on the pregnancy didn’t seem so much our own. It seemed like we were doing things on other people’s time and other people’s energy. You know, it didn’t seem like our experience any more in some ways because we needed so much help from other people, the medical field, I guess – the medical establishment.” As we will see throughout this narrative, Ethan’s feeling of disenfranchisement would continue even beyond the birth of his child.

Understandably, Ethan found it difficult to know just how to feel about the possibility of having a child with Down’s syndrome. He told me, “I had had no experience whatsoever with anything like that; nothing in my family, nothing in the neighborhood, no contact at all with the handicapped. I was really in tune with lots of causes in life, you know, poverty, race, gender, or something, but never handicapped causes.” This part of his story was characterized by ambivalence. On one hand, Ethan was excited and hopeful about becoming a father. On the other hand, the thought of having a child with profound special needs was frightening and unknown. He described to me an experience he had directly after learning the news about the possible problems with the pregnancy:

We were talking to a new doctor but we were just in the hallway and he was like telling us stuff, and this guy came running down the hall, and he
had stolen people’s purses and was like trying to leave the hospital, and there were these old women chasing him, screaming “purse snatcher!” And I had so much anger and frustration, everything was like a whirlwind. So like this guy ran past me but then me and one of the janitors went after him and chased him down and tackled him and wrestled the purses from him. It was just like, the feeling I was having, it was quite a release to be able to do that, you know. ‘Cause I needed to put my emotions somewhere and that was the perfect place to put them.

A question that became central for Ethan and Hanna at this early stage in the pregnancy was whether or not to maintain the pregnancy. He said, “Hanna was very… intent on wanting to have the child. [pause] I was probably not so sure.” Ethan told me that their families encouraged them to keep the baby, assuring them that everything would work out all right. In retrospect, Ethan felt that this was not very good advice, “because it put hope in a place that didn’t have room for as much hope as we put there.” He told me that,

Better advice would be, possibly – I would give to someone after going through this is, it could be really hard, it could be really challenging, but you are the people it was meant to happen to, for a reason maybe. You should look at that, but it’s going to be hard and challenging. You need to get your emotions and your mind straight on what you’re doing. More than looking toward the “not,” looking toward what’s going to come in nine months, you know, and how you’re going to deal with it.

Ultimately, Ethan and Hanna decided to have their baby, and the following months were a combination of medical tests and what he described as the “normal” things that people do when they are expecting: picking names, preparing a space, and so on. Once again Ethan described his experience as ambivalent. “It was happy because I was happy to be a father, but there was a lot of anxiety and unknowing and a lot of sadness I think also, and some hope. I don’t know, it was very… there were a lot of emotions […] There was lots of doubting.”
Ethan told me that he spent a lot of time wondering how his child came to have Down’s syndrome. “I wasn’t quite sure why the child would be handicapped. You know, was it me, genetically?” This was an important issue to Ethan in terms of his decision to keep his child. “It was a huge concern at the time, because partially, in deciding whether to keep the child or not, I would consider that if it’s me and I have a genetic problem that would lead to that then I should keep the child, because that’s just the nature of it, that’s just the nature of me and my life and what’s meant for me.” Of course, the decision as to whether or not to continue the pregnancy was not Ethan’s alone and that knowledge made his contemplations all the more complicated. “It’s hard to consider those things when this is happening within the mother, and part of it’s her, you know? It’s her body and it’s happening there. I think the toughest thing was... in my experience, it’s hard for couples to sometimes stay focused together in what maybe you perceive is a tragedy or a really hard time.” Ethan’s realization that this issue involved not only the shared being of this developing baby but also the mother’s body points to a feature of fathers’ experience that is salient throughout all of the interviews I conducted; paternity and maternity are not equal in their role in the development of the child.

As I mentioned above, the course of the pregnancy involved many more medical examinations and tests. It was at one of these tests that Ethan again felt acutely his disenfranchisement and alienation from the experience of the pregnancy. Ethan and Hanna had gone to the hospital for an ultrasound and discovered that their baby had a dangerously large heart murmur, in which a valve in the heart does not close completely and so leaks blood that would normally carry oxygen through the blood stream. It was immediately following this news that,
the doctor, in a moment of complete rudeness, called over one of the
medical students and started talking about the degree of it and what was
happening in front of us as if we weren’t in the room. And caused a lot of
emotions in Hanna, you know, she started crying as it was happening.
And looking back on it, I wish I would have told them both to just shut the
hell up [...] We were so needy to these people – it wasn’t a birth that we
could conceive of on our own – I kind of got the feeling I was on other
people’s time, like I’ve said before. So, it was hard. I didn’t feel like I
had rights in some ways.

Looking back, Ethan expressed to me that even this feeling was marked by
ambivalence for him. Although it was frustrating for him to feel that he and Hanna were
being treated impersonally, as if they were specimens rather than people in the midst of a
difficult emotional experience, he also felt a certain gratitude to these people who were
making sure that their baby would survive. “They’re gonna save your child, so you feel
slightly indebted to them. I mean, I do. Because she’s alive and they saved her, you
know? So nothing can take that away. That’s a gift, you know?”

The Birth

Ethan told me that his experience of the birth of his daughter was a mix of
conflicting emotions. “There was, like, excitement, hope, feeling good, and then there
was, like, fear, and anxiety, and I think some shame. I’m not sure why. My own
situation wouldn’t call for shame, but I feel like I had some, related to it for some reason.
I think I took a lot of it personally.” When I asked him if he meant that he felt somehow
responsible for his child’s complications he responded in the affirmative. He went on to
say, “if I ever felt inadequate as a teenager or something, and I was just coming out of
being a teenager, if there’s something wrong with me, this would validate that there was
possibly...” I took this to mean that Ethan felt that somehow his adolescent feelings of
inadequacy were showing themselves to be justified by giving him a child with Down’s syndrome. Ethan did not elaborate on this experience, but went on with his story of the birth.

The birth itself saw plenty more instances of the aforementioned medical intervention into Ethan and Hanna’s experience, but here Ethan described the role of the medical staff in more favorable terms. “At one point they decided they needed to break the water, which I’m not sure why they needed to do that. But I really felt like I was turning over to an authority who was more equipped to deal with what I was going through.” In this statement there seems to me to be a marked contrast in how Ethan took up his role in relation to the medical establishment’s procedures and attitude. Whereas during the pregnancy Ethan felt that his experience was being co-opted by the doctors and technicians, during the birth Ethan seemed to feel that there were medical issues that were simply better left to medical professionals. Besides, as Ethan told me, “there were other things to worry about, you know what I mean? I mean, the mood of the nurse or the doctor was not important to us, you know? Whether they were pushy or whether they weren’t wasn’t important to us.”

It is important to note, however, that this shift in Ethan’s perspective on the involvement of the medical establishment did not negate his desire that the birth be treated with dignity and discretion. He recalled a visit during the birth that demonstrates this point.

At some point this doctor came in and I don’t know if he was a geneticist or what, but he gave us this, like, poured all this possible bad news on us like, “you might not recognize the child, the child might have all these problems, I just want you to be aware.” And it was so out of hand. Like there was no reason why this man should have come in and said that […]
There was no need for him to be there right then, like right before we were about to go on stage, you know. It was totally out of hand.

The effect of this visit was detrimental in precisely that intangible way that the medical perspective seems least able to understand or account for. As Ethan described it, “The energy – he sucked a lot of the energy out of the room. We were doing well and that was a little bit of a crash.”

The situation changed shortly after the doctor’s visit when Hanna was transported to the delivery room. After a long session of pushing and contractions, Hanna had agreed to an epidural, and “within an hour the baby was born. And that part was exciting […] We got on the stretcher and rolled into the delivery room and she was really powerful and we had left the epidural, and left that guy and left that room, you know. And had the child.” Ethan’s description of the moment of parturition was particularly striking to me in its simple straightforward and matter-of-fact style. “So, we had Jenny. She came out, they did some things, she was crying. She was okay. They weighed her. She didn’t look like anything was wrong with her, she looked like a little baby, you know? She didn’t look like she had Down’s syndrome; she just looked like a baby. And that was it.”

After the birth, Ethan and Hanna were able to finally meet the person over whom they had worried and hoped for so many months. “And then we got her back and we just hung out with her. And we just sat there with her, and we just took turns with her.”

During this time of bonding with their new baby, Ethan told me, he felt for the first time the impact of what it meant for him to become a father. “[Hanna] held her and then we put her in this little bassinet thing. I remember looking and was like, ‘if she doesn’t hold her someone’s got to hold her.’ And it was like I immediately realized this was my child and it’s upon me to take care of this child.” Ethan went on to describe the insular and
protected feeling that came with this realization. “There was an immediate connection and all of the trouble, for the moment, was behind me, and it was just me and my child and my girlfriend at the time.”

I asked Ethan how it felt for him to suddenly realize that he, as this child’s father, was responsible for her. His response was that, “it carried an extra punch, because I felt like this child is gonna need special care and it’s me that’s going to give it.” He went on to say that, “there was a different feeling. I guess it’s hard… I recognize it as different now, having another child, but at the time I just felt extremely… like it was just me and the child. It was like, this child has needs. I’m that provider. It’s almost like being a god to this child. No one else could do it but me.”

**Being a Father - Postpartum and Beyond**

After the birth, Ethan began forming a bond with his daughter as her father. About his developing role as father he told me, “it felt like being a father would, yeah. It felt good. I never grew up having a father, so it didn’t feel familiar. It felt unique in a lot of ways. Like, between the troubles and everything, but it felt like it was my story, my thing to be this child’s provider. It felt good. I felt kind of privileged.”

Ethan’s experience with the medical establishment did not end with the birth of his daughter. He told me that, due to complications stemming from the heart murmur, Jenny could not nurse normally and so Ethan and Hanna had to feed her through a syringe-and-catheter device attached to one or the other’s finger as the baby sucked on the finger. Ethan told me that this was a difficult procedure, as it required a fair amount of pressure to push the syringe plunger down and force milk through the catheter. He
said, “I was equally responsible for feeding her as her mother. If not more, because I had
more strength to do it.” When I asked Ethan how he imagined Hanna felt that he was
more involved in the baby’s feeding than she was he responded, “I think in some ways
she probably… I think she appreciated it, you know? That I was willing to do it.”

This special feeding process was necessary. As Ethan said, “this child would
have just let herself die and you had to make her live.” And although Ethan felt that the
experience of feeding and caring for his daughter was rewarding, it was also challenging.
Ethan told me that the constant care required for his daughter’s survival was often
exhausting. The feeding tube was required until the baby was large enough to undergo
corrective surgery to repair the leaking valve.

We took her in and she had the heart surgery early, so I think after a
month or six weeks she was having the heart surgery, even though she
hadn’t gotten to the weight. And that was hard. By then we were really
worn out I would say. I felt like a new and different person. I felt like a
father, but I also felt like I had this huge task at hand that wasn’t always
rewarding.

He went on to say that, although the experience of caring for his child was positive for
him, it was marked by hardship. He said, “there was joy every day but you had to look
for it.”

During the course of the constant care of their child, Ethan told me, a rift began to
develop between himself and Hanna. “I think at some point me and her mother weren’t
having the same experience anymore. It was different for both of us.” When I asked him
how the experience differed for each of them Ethan replied, “I think we both perceived
the whole thing slightly differently. It meant different things, it hurt different ways, it
was joyful in different ways.” Ethan qualified his characterization of his situation with
Hanna by adding that, “there are some things that me and her have that we understand
that nobody else will understand, you know, like we’ve been through something
together.” When I inquired how Ethan thought that the emergence of this difference in
perspective affected his relationship with Hanna he told me, “I think I really wanted to
escape from it. I think I did in some ways.”

Ethan told me that a major challenge during this time in their lives with their new
baby both he and Hanna found themselves needing a break that never really came
because their concern for her survival was ongoing. He said, “there’s always this
concern. Like, is your child going to live? […] You get really tired and start feeling
really…thin.” Still, in the midst of all of the struggles involved in his early career in
fatherhood, Ethan told me that his experience of being a father was positive. Even when
he had to leave for work, Ethan said, “you feel like a father no matter where you are, and
that’s great feeling.” But even though Ethan felt good in his role as a father, he felt a lot
of pressure from responsibilities that were often in conflict. Not only was his presence
required at home, to feed and care for his child so that Hanna could find what little respite
she could, but he had to go into the world to earn his living and support his family. This
feeling of being needed in both worlds wore on him. Of this dilemma he said, “you kind
of feel like even if you’re not there, you’re at work or doing something, you feel like you
should be there. It’s hard like you feel like you should be in two places at once. I started
to feel like I needed to be everywhere at once, and it was hard.”

The combined pressure of Jenny’s early heart problems and the Ethan’s and
Hanna’s ongoing concern about their daughter’s Down’s Syndrome was complicated by
yet another medical concern. At around one year, Jenny was diagnosed with Leukemia.
She underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatment, and by the time her treatment was
over, Ethan told me, so, effectively, was his relationship with Hanna.

[Jenny] was in the hospital for like a year. Yeah, she had blood cancer,
and went through that. And by then, me and her mother weren’t really
together. We were but it was just like… The road was too hard to do it
with somebody. It was better to have your… I don’t know. I mean, I was
closed off from being a person who could be in a relationship other than
for the child.

In trying to describe to me how the split came about, Ethan seemed to be telling me that
he felt responsible, at least insofar as he did not or could not provide something necessary
for the relationship to survive. He said, “I think we started to resent each other in some
ways. Because the situation was hard. I couldn’t necessarily be enough for the situation
[…] There would be a way to see that maybe I wasn’t enough and maybe that was what
she was seeing, that maybe I wasn’t enough. Or no matter what I could be it wouldn’t
make the situation different.”

Although Ethan’s story was full of examples of the hardship involved in
parenting, he continuously balanced the difficult anecdotes with statements affirming the
pleasure he takes in being a father. He assured me that, “I have to say I was still happy to
be a father, and still enjoyed all the first steps […] Taking her first steps and walking.
And it was great, you know. It was really exciting. It was wonderful.” Additionally,
Ethan told me that his experience being as difficult as it has been has given him an
important insight into his time as a father. “There’s an interesting thing about being a
father to a child that you think there’s a good chance that you’ll outlive. You kind of
know that going into it. And I don’t think about it all the time but you don’t like any time
to go by and not cherish the time.” Even now that Jenny is older and out of immediate
danger, Ethan told me he takes every chance he can to give her his love. “For years she
didn’t feel comfortable with touch, because everyone that was touching her was hurting her. She had hard times with that. I cuddle her and, like, hold her now like she’s a two year-old because she’s willing to take it.”

One aspect of Ethan’s experience as a father that I found to be particularly significant and specific to his situation is that, as he told me, since he and Hanna were constantly involved in trying to keep their child alive for the first several years of her life, he did not actually reflect on his experience of being a father for some time. He said to me, “you’re asking me what is it like to be a father… There wasn’t time to reflect on it as it pertained to just me […] It was very focused around the child. The experience, I felt, was what she was going through. And I don’t know if I ever really got the experience for myself until way later.” And although for Ethan the work of becoming a father was so full of difficulties he told me, “I look at all the work I put into it and it was worth it. And it gives me a new perspective about being a father.”

**Charlie’s Story**

Charlie is a Caucasian man in his early thirties. At the time of our conversation, he was a father of two, with a third child on the way. Charlie’s eldest child is actually his wife’s child from a previous relationship. Because Charlie was not present at the birth of the eldest child, our discussion focused on the birth of his daughter, Mandy.

Charlie comes across an easy-going man who is quick to laugh and clown around, but it quickly becomes apparent that he is just as quick to become serious and attentive. Throughout our conversation he was openly emotional about his experience, being moved to tears as he recalled the profound awe and wonder he felt in witnessing the birth
of his daughter. Even so, Charlie managed to laugh about many aspects of the birth that, at the time, he found frustrating.

Charlie is the fourth of five children in a family that emphasizes family cohesion. In order to situate Charlie’s account of the pregnancy and birth, I will first outline in narrative form Charlie’s perspective on family and fatherhood and on his own parents and how they contributed to the formation of this aspect of his worldview.

**Family and the Father’s Role**

When I asked Charlie what fatherhood means to him, his first response was to say, “I don’t know.” But he quickly followed that with the statement that his role as a father involves trying to do what his father did for him – namely, to give his children the ability to use logic and reason. He told me that his father is, “analytical and logical about everything.” Charlie contrasted his father’s rational style with his mother’s more intuitive and emotionally driven style of approaching situations. To illustrate the difference between his parents’ ways of dealing with problems, Charlie gave me the following hypothetical situation:

> If you come to my mom with a problem it’s more like she would throw out random ideas to try to fix it, rather than sit back and think about it for a second and say, “oh, […] what you should do is this, this, this, and this.” Instead, it’s more like just try to solve something on the… I don’t know how to explain it. It’s more like a one-step type of… Like if this is wrong do this. If you come home with a cut, you go get in the car to get ready to go to the emergency room. Whereas my dad would be like, “well, let’s go see if you need to go to the emergency room or not. Let’s make sure it makes sense to even waste time to drive down there.” Whereas my mom would be like, “get in the car, I’ll go get my purse.”

Although Charlie contrasted his father’s style with his mother’s in terms of the process by which they determine how to deal with problem situations, saying that, “my
mom’s more emotional than my dad is by far,” he hastened to say that his father has, “never been super emotional but he’s not withdrawn either.” When I asked Charlie about other role models who might have had an impact on his own parenting style he replied that his parents were the only people he could think of who had had a clear and direct influence, saying, “it’s so hard thinking about trying to figure out who my role-models were as a kid.”

For Charlie, family is what matters. He repeatedly mentioned how important it is to him that the fabric of the family remains intact. For instance, he told me that it is important for him to see, “the family [as] an important unit rather than something that’s just throw away. Because half the people anymore today seem to take it as a, ‘well, we can try.’ You know, and you’ve got all these kids from broken up families.” Charlie also told me that he feels that the parents are largely responsible for ensuring that, not only does their family stay together, but that their own children will come to understand the importance of keeping their own families together when they become parents. Charlie said that both his parents and his wife’s parents provided good examples of maintaining a family. When I asked him if he felt that his parents showed him that it is possible to keep a family together, he responded, “yeah. Well, they definitely did. ‘Cause, I don’t know. So much anymore, I mean, luckily Ann’s the same way, I mean her parents were together until her dad died too. And so it’s like we both come from that and so it makes it a lot easier to, you know, realize that problems will pass.”

For Charlie it seemed important to make a distinction between what he perceived to be a common situation in today’s social environment in which parents too easily decide to separate at the detriment to their family and his own situation in which he and
his wife recognize that the benefits of staying together through difficult times far outweighs the temporary relief of “throwing in the towel” when things get tough. “If there are fights or arguments or stuff like that, still we are always trying to figure out how to solve them rather than, you know, ‘oh I don’t even know why we should be together.’”

Ultimately, Charlie seemed to me to have a very clearly defined idea of some essential aspects of the father’s role. First, the father has a responsibility with the mother to hold the family together in the face of adversity. For Charlie, the sense that I got was that he was simply not willing to jeopardize his children’s right to a cohesive family unit for the sake of satisfying his own occasional feelings of frustration with his interpersonal relationships. Second, the father should carry on the transmission of whatever fatherly wisdom his own father gave to him. In Charlie’s case, he will look to instill logic and reason in his children, just as his own father instilled it in him. In any case, it seems clear to me that Charlie values his own parents’ influence on him as he develops his identity as a father.

It was telling that Charlie focused almost exclusively on his memories of his own parents when trying to describe the influences on his views on fatherhood and parenting. Throughout the interview Charlie made several references to his lack of interest in what others (that is, non-family members) had to say about his situation. In some ways, our entire conversation could be characterized by Charlie’s apparent independence from the desires and attitudes of those outside his family.
The Pregnancy

The first thing that became clear about Charlie’s experience of the time leading up to the birth was that he was not well informed or particularly well-prepared as to what his responsibilities were as the father. In this case, even his family was of little assistance. He told me, “I don’t even know if my dad was present during the births of any of us.” Charlie also said that he did not seek out other people’s advice on the matter. “I never really talked to anybody who’d been there at the birth [of their own children].”

The result of this was that Charlie did not know what to think about his experience, in terms of what he might reasonably expect. Although he was excited about becoming a father, his experience was, he told me, difficult to accept as concrete and real. “I was freaked out, but at the same time it wasn’t really real to me […] I wasn’t not excited about it, but I wasn’t emotionally attached because I had never been… I had no idea what to expect.” When I asked Charlie if he thought that, in retrospect, the experience would have been easier for him to assimilate if he had had other fathers to talk with about it he replied, “not really. I’m kind of independent about things like that anyway.” For Charlie, other people’s anecdotes only reflected their own attitudes and were of little use to him. He told me that only the direct experience was really important to him. “That weighs a lot more than talk. For me, talking to other people about what it was like for them… It’s like, yeah, but that was their experience. And, you know, everyone’s going to tell you something different.” Charlie repeatedly told me that he believed that he had everything he needed in order to fulfill his role in the pregnancy and birth. “No one really told me what to expect. I didn’t really ask anybody either, though. I figured I’d know when the time came what to do, you know.”
The only point at which Charlie acknowledged that he might have liked some input from other fathers who had gone through pregnancy and birth before was in his statement that, “the only thing I probably could have gotten help with by talking with people is them maybe telling me, ‘well, you’re probably going to be in the hospital for two days, so be ready for that.’ You know, but other than that, nothing really. I wish I had known that.”

Of course, just because Charlie did not solicit advice from others, this does not mean that others did not offer it. He spoke only of one instance in which a piece of advice turned out to be spot on.

The one thing people did tell me as far as advice, that I had talked to. It was, “well, it will change your life.” And me being me of course, my first thought on that was, “of course it’s going to change my life. I’m gonna have a baby to take care of.” I wasn’t getting, “it’ll change your life all of a sudden – this is gonna be the most important thing in your life.”

In this case, Charlie seemed to have no problem conceding that he would have benefited from trying to understand the significance of someone else’s perspective. Still, this does not contradict Charlie’s assertion that his own direct experience would ultimately be more informative than second-hand information.

Charlie mentioned at one point that during the pregnancy he sometimes felt as if he had no really essential part to play. Speaking of his participation in prenatal medical visits, he said, “I went to as many of [Ann’s] appointments as I could with her, you know. And I wanted to be part of it, but I didn’t really know how to be part of it. And so it was kind of like the feeling of tagging along.” This feeling of “tagging along” with his wife during the months leading up to the birth did little to make him feel better in terms of having some sense of what to expect at the birth. Rather, he continued to feel the vague
mix of excitement and derealization mentioned earlier. “I didn’t know what to expect. That’s why I was kind of freaked out.” Charlie also told me that this feeling was difficult for him because he felt that it conveyed the wrong sense to Ann. “You know, I feel bad about that – you know, about the fact that it wasn’t real to me when she was pregnant before, because she was wanting me to be excited about it and stuff, and I don’t know how to be excited about something unless I’m really excited about it – especially if someone knows you well. They can tell if you’re faking it.”

What little exposure Charlie had had to the birth event itself was largely the edited and produced images from television shows chronicling couples’ births. What he saw on these programs did not make him feel any more comfortable or confident, however. “I mean you see those baby story shows or whatever and they have the dad come out and help catch or cut the umbilical cord and stuff like that, and I was like, ‘that’s kind of weird, I’m not a doctor.’”

It seemed to me that Charlie’s account of the pregnancy suggested his discomfort at being present at such an intimate event. When I asked him how he felt during the pregnancy when he contemplated being at the event he told me, “I wouldn’t call it nervousness as much as general discomfort. I wasn’t comfortable being in there because to me, the way I saw it before it happened it was kind of like being in the bathroom while someone’s going to the bathroom. And it’s like, isn’t that a private moment? Isn’t that kind of, you know, you’ve got everything hanging out.” He went on to say that his own concern about his wife’s privacy stemmed, at least in part, from his assumption that Ann would also feel awkward about having him there. “I felt kind of uncomfortable about it because I would expect her to feel uncomfortable about it.” I asked Charlie what he
thought Ann expected of him at the birth, given that he had made the assumption that she would feel uncomfortable with him being present at such a private moment. He responded, “I didn’t know that either.”

As our conversation continued, Charlie seemed to revise his earlier assertion that he had had no idea what to expect. Rather, he realized that his ignorance had more to do with how he would react to the birth than with what would actually happen at the birth. “As far as biological functions, I knew what to expect, but as far as any sort of emotions or anything like that, I didn’t know what to expect at all.” In discussing his concerns regarding this issue, Charlie told me, “I’d have doubts. It was like, ‘What if I’m not meant to be a dad? What if I don’t fall in love with this kid?’ You know? Because I’ve been around other people’s babies that annoyed the crap out of me, and it was like, ‘what if I’m just that way?’ So to me it was more a fear of [not bonding with my baby] than anything else.”

When I asked Charlie what other fears he had had about being at the birth he told me that he was worried, “that I’d get grossed out.” I asked him to clarify what he meant by being “grossed out,” and his response was,

I was, I guess on some level, expecting that I would want to leave the room and not be there because all this was going on and I would not want to see it or something. But I don’t know if grossed out is the right word but I don’t even know what the right word would be. Just that I’d rather not be there than be there, you know? That it would just be unpleasant. I think that’s a better way to describe it than disgusting, but just unpleasant.

The Birth and Retrospection

Charlie’s account of the birth event itself began at the point at which Ann’s epidural wore off. He described the situation in terms of a conflict between Ann’s
understanding of her own progress and the nurse’s assumption that she knew better than Ann what to expect.

It wore completely off. And then it started getting frantic all of a sudden because the nurse was saying, “aw, we’ve got plenty of time. There’s going to be another couple hours or so, so we can get the anesthesiologist back down here” and dadadadada. And Ann’s like, “uh uh, I’ve got to push, I’ve got to push.” And the nurse is going, “No. You can’t push. You’ve got plenty of time.” And then she gets on the phone and she calls the guy back down to do the epidural again.

As it turned out, Ann was correct and the labor progressed rapidly from that point on to the delivery.

During this time, Charlie was focused on trying to hear and respond to Ann’s needs. “As far as what other people expected me to do it was kind of to keep getting whatever she wanted. If she wanted more ice, grab her more ice. If she wanted a washcloth, put a washcloth on her head.” Charlie found that his own role in the birth – responding directly to his wife’s needs as well as he could – brought him into direct conflict with the agenda of the nurses in attendance. “The nurses kept trying to push me out of the way and Ann kept saying, ‘stay here,’ and so I’d stay there and the nurses were having to work around me. They were getting irritated, I could tell, but, you know, screw them. It’s not about them […] Ann was saying, ‘don’t leave. Stay right there.’ So I’m gonna stay right there.”

Despite the tension that Charlie experienced with the medical staff, his telling of the story suggested to me that this part played only an ancillary role in his experience of the birth of his daughter. He placed much more emphasis on the emotional impact the birth had on him – precisely that aspect of the birth that he had previously told me was the only useful advice anyone had tried to give him.
Charlie described for me his experience of cutting the umbilical cord and how what was potentially a moment for feeling disgust showed itself differently because of the emotional impact of the situation.

Just the idea of it. I mean, I’ve seen pictures of it before and even still in retrospect, thinking about it, it’s weird to me that it’s not disgusting, because just on a basic level it should be. I mean, this bloody thing comes out and it’s… You know, when I cut the umbilical cord, blood shot up in my face and got all over my glasses and it wasn’t even the first thought in my head you know, “eew, gross."

I asked Charlie to remember the thought that went through his mind when blood shot all over his glasses and he replied, “I don’t even know. I can’t explain what the thought was, I mean I was aware that it happened and I thought it was funny and I was crying and laughing at the same time.”

Charlie described the event as having a liminal quality similar to, “an accident situation or something like that, where everything is in slow motion and you’re vividly aware of everything.” We spoke about how it was that this experience was so powerful for Charlie and he told me, “I think my expectations were way lower than what actually ended up happening.” When I asked him if, by lower, he meant that he was expecting it to be less profound he responded, “YES. That’s exactly what I mean.” He went on to say that the fact that he had not previously understood the significance of the baby’s actual entrance into the world had resulted in an amplified emotional experience. “I didn’t really understand the ramifications of it. I didn’t understand the fact that you can instantly fall in love.”

The statement that best characterizes this part of Charlie’s story was his exclamation, “everything changed in that split second.” Charlie found it difficult to express to me precisely how things changed for him, except to say that it was an entirely
emotional experience. “I was so overwhelmed with emotion [and] that overflowing of emotion [is such that] you can’t really even put it into words in the least little bit.”

Toward the end of our conversation Charlie returned to the theme of his experience being made real at the moment of birth. He explained to me that he did not mean to say that he did not know that what was happening was real intellectually, but rather that his intellectual understanding had little bearing on his emotional response to the pregnancy.

He told me that at the birth, “emotionally, that is the second that it just became real. And that’s the second that I learned what absolute unconditional love at first second is, you know, all of a sudden.” Charlie recounted the moment of the birth of his child and his emotional response:

All of a sudden this little thing stretched out and unfolded into a baby – and it was all of a sudden! Seriously! And that is the exact second that everything just became overwhelming. I just started crying, I couldn’t believe it. It was like… And that’s where I can’t explain. You know? In the least little bit, I can’t explain how I was feeling. I hope that I’m lucky enough to have that exact feeling again sometime in my life. Just that one absolute wonder, astonishment, awe, everything, all at once, and your just overflowing all of a sudden. And it’s like in that very second, it was real. And it wasn’t until then.

**John’s Story**

John is a Caucasian man in his mid-seventies. His son was born in 1961 and has a child of his own. Of all of the fathers I spoke with, John was the only grandfather. Our conversation was very enjoyable to me. John was not only very good at articulating his experience of being a father; he was also clearly adept at storytelling. Looking back at the transcript of this conversation I was struck by how many anecdotes John provided in order to illustrate his feelings, rather than simply telling me, “I feel this way.”
At the time of his son’s birth, John was a dental student in Southern California. Along with being a dentist and a professor of dentistry, John was also a fighter-bomber pilot. Currently, he is retired and spends much of his time perfecting his art as a modern-day blacksmith. This interesting mix of vocations showed itself in the way John described his story to me. On one hand, John’s medical training was obvious as he told me about the technical aspects of the pregnancy and birth. On the other hand, John’s attitude toward his experience was far from being dry and clinical. Rather, his descriptions often included the sort of language one might associate with a poet’s description of rapture. All in all, John was a fascinating person to speak with.

John, like all of the fathers I spoke with, was openly emotional at different times throughout the conversation. In discussing the birth of his son, John proudly acknowledged the fact that he wept at the sight. John also seemed to me to be fond of humor. As he told me his story he often made joking comments (often at his own expense) and made special note of others’ sense of humor. His story runs the course of several decades and does not focus on his experience of birth so much as it provides a fairly comprehensive reflection on an entire career of fathering his son.

**Fatherhood**

When I asked John what fatherhood means to him, he replied with the sort of scientific answer that came to characterize many of his assessments in his story. “I think [fatherhood] means that I have somehow carried on my family gene pool.” John’s answer was only half-serious, though, as he went on to say that this, “is a little ridiculous given that I very much feel a family gene pool with everyone alive on this planet.”
expanded on his response, John also gave me the first intimation of a theme that would appear more often as our conversation continued. Regret may be too strong a word for this theme; sadness may more accurate. “I was around thirty years old when our son was born. And I had really looked forward to this because I thought that I would be a really wonderful father. I had great expectations, most of which didn’t come to fruition.” He told me that he perceived his role as, “to first of all nurture him, give him a sense of what is this world about, what is life about, how do you deal with this in the most appropriate and intelligent way? And keeping the morals foremost, morals and honesty foremost as guidelines as to how I would raise this child.”

John had much to say on the topic of role models. He told me at one point that he had, at some point in his adult life, seen a psychotherapist for several years. He also said that therapy had provided him with a lot of insight into his relationship with his own parents as well as his parents’ relationship with each other. Thanks to this prior work that John had already done to puzzle out the intricacies of parent-child dynamics, he was able to provide me with very detailed and clear images of his own parents, as he perceived them. This, in turn, shed no small light on John’s account of his own style of parenting.

John described the roles his parents played in very strong terms: “The bad there was my mother, very bad. And my father, wishing very much… It was understood that my mother supported my brother and my father was supportive of me.” He described his relationship with his father in much more positive terms than his relationship with his mother, but added that he felt that his father could not assert himself on John’s behalf as much as he should have. This, in turn, according to John, made it difficult for him to recognize those things his father did do for him until later in John’s life.
I think that my father as a role model for me didn’t come about until much later when I happened to go through two years of psychotherapy. Then I began to understand and I can reflect back now on how much he told me about himself, about life, about how to behave. I didn’t understand at the time – it wasn’t significant. I look back now and he gave me a volume of information.

In terms of influences on John’s understanding of what a father’s role ought to be, he told me that his grandfather was his most important role model. He explained to me how his grandfather came to fill a void left by his father’s silence.

[My grandfather] was my real role model, more so than my father, whom I to this day adore. I absolutely adore my father, but he was under such constraint that I don’t think he could ever allow himself to come through directly – it was always indirect. Things I found out later that he told me. He told me some amazing things about his relationship with my mother and how it affected me, so that I could, in later life, put it together. And I think somehow I knew that would happen, but the most direct and obvious influence on me as a role model was my grandfather.

John went on to describe his grandfather:

My grandfather […] was a towering inspiration in my life. He was also physically towering at 6’4”. He had been sheriff of Clatsop County, he had been police chief of Astoria. He’d been fire chief. He had fought… he was the first sheriff to survive in office as sheriff of that county. There were gunfights constantly and I know of at least two that he had in the official line of duty and he obviously lived to old age. He won – he killed these people. And yet I don’t… I think of him in terms of a man who would stand up for not only his own life, but those of… other people’s lives as well, which was part of his official duty. But he would not allow rampant lawlessness. That was his job, but this was the image I had of him […] He still had that bearing about him, about what is good, what is bad. He made it very clear it wasn’t always black and white. There was this sense of a man who stood for law and order, who was willing to stand up and put his life on the line to see that it was carried out. But at the same time he was kind and gentle and thoughtful.

John described his grandfather in terms of love and admiration. It was clear to me that John held his grandfather in the highest esteem and desired to emulate those qualities that he described in his story of his grandfather. Of these qualities, fairness, honor,
toughness, bravery, and so on, the qualities that John seemed most impressed by was his grandfather’s love for his family and his gentleness. As John told me, “It was very important that he wanted certainly his own children and even his grandchildren, of which he had three, to be with the family, to be part of the family, to be nurtured by the family. His gentleness extended to such things as the way he treated his dog. He handfed old Babe, a little Boston terrier. And I saw him, and I choke when I think about this, I saw this great man who was so gentle, gentle with me.”

**Pregnancy - Preparing for the Birth**

Like all of the other fathers I spoke with for this project, John reported having had no experience with pregnancy and childbirth prior to his wife’s pregnancy with their son. Furthermore, John told me that there was little in the way of available resources on the subject of childbirth and the father’s place in it. “The only text I had to go by was Dr. Spock, which is mostly a medical reference. I had no training whatsoever, other than the training I got as a child, which was both good and bad.” Although John did not find much on the topic, he told me that he and his wife “attended some classes given by a doctor who later became the Dr. Spock of his time.”

John also remembered that an important aspect of his own preparations for imminent fatherhood included the commissioning of a bassinet. “We found a basket weaver – a very old man in Portland, who wove baskets – and he was probably the last who was really good at that. Wicker, wickerwork chairs, that kind of thing. So we had constructed a bassinet that was absolutely gorgeous.”
When I asked John whether other people offered him and his wife any advice or warnings he replied, “No. Just expressing great joy. But nothing in the way of ‘do this’ or ‘do that’ that I recall. No advice. I later got to the point where I would ask advice of close friends on how to deal with various issues as he grew up but no, at the time, none that I can recall.” Ultimately, John did not have much to say on the subject of the pregnancy and his preparations for the birth. By his own admission, “there wasn’t really very much between us in terms of preparing for this child in the end.” John attributed this largely to his demanding schedule in dental school.

**Being at the Birth**

John’s presence at the birth was, in itself, something worth commenting on. In 1961, very few fathers in the U.S. were present at the births of their children. As John told me, “it was relatively uncommon […] I felt that I was probably allowed to go in to the delivery because of my being a dental health student and being involved in health care.” Even though there was little in the way of preparation for his presence at the birth, John told me that his expectations for the birth, “were, oddly enough, to the best of my recollection true to what actually happened.”

According to John, the birth lasted around twenty-four hours, culminating in a cesarean delivery. Despite the complications during labor, John “was just ecstatic.” He went on to tell me that witnessing his son’s birth “brought forth such strong emotions, I openly wept, sitting there on the little platform in the ring of seats around the surgical area. I broke up and balled my eyes out […] Nowadays I could have picked him up right away. But that was not allowed. But I was absolutely so joyous I wept. Loudly.”
In keeping with John’s proclivity for telling serious stories with a sense of humor, he told me that it was, “a very emotional thing when I saw that child coming out. He came out butt-first. I thought to myself at the time, ‘I hope he doesn’t go through life that way,’ but he did for a while certainly. Screaming at the top of his lungs. You know, I whispered to him, ‘give ‘em hell, son.’ Which he did.” This anecdote, while providing a good example of John’s playful way of talking, also hints at some of the difficulties he would have to face as his son grew older.

When I asked John to describe his concerns about the birth he responded, “I worried about, you know, the usual things. Ten fingers, ten toes. Did he have a cleft palate? And I knew a lot more because I had taken these courses that were basically medical courses. And I knew through embryology the possibility of defects.” As it turned out, John told me, the labor and delivery had not been entirely without complications. “The pediatrician felt that possibly, because of this long period of delivery that would have culminated in death had not the cesarean been done, resulted in a lack of oxygen that later caused him to have problems, because he was in fact hyperactive.”

**Raising a Son**

John seemed to me to take great pleasure in telling me his story. At one point he said, “It chokes me now. I could burst into tears just thinking about it […] After forty years it just chokes me up to think about it. I have a picture, very clearly […] I’m there and I remember leaving the hospital, you know, with the baby in the little green Volkswagen and bringing home the baby, and the bassinet ready to go for him.” I asked
John to describe the changes he underwent in becoming a father. His response was, “Well, I think it just changed the focus of my life so dramatically. This son became everything to me […] Yeah. He became really the focus of my life, absolutely. Everything revolved around him.”

That everything in John’s world revolved around his son was borne out by the way he recounted for me what it was like for him to parent his young son. He told me that, “when he was born, why, he slept – next to me.” Much of the responsibility for the care of the child fell to John. “My wife went into this serious depression which is not uncommon, and I was essentially the caregiver for this baby. I changed his diapers, I fed him.” When I suggested to him that this seemed like a lot of responsibility for a father in that era, he agreed and told me, “I just had the sense that somehow I would manage all of this […] I think I actually went beyond what I perceived as my responsibilities, because I didn’t see that [in] most fathers.”

A theme that I heard several times from fathers during our conversations was a desire to have a more active part in the care of the baby. More specifically, several fathers told me that they wished they could provide for their children the sort of nurturance they felt only the mother could give. John told me,

The role I took was one of… my wife wasn’t performing as well as I thought she should. Feed him and clean him and bathe him – I did all of these things. I was almost a mother to this son […] I went beyond what I thought that society was telling me I should do as a father. I love this role so much. You know, I almost had a true wish that I could have breastfed him. That’s how strongly I felt about this child.

Not only does the above passage illustrate a father’s desire to provide the kind of care normally associated with his child’s mother in general terms, it also specifically points to the growing conflict between John and his wife and what John perceived to be
the resultant breakdown in his relationship with his son. John told me that, because of what he perceived to be his wife’s overindulgence of their son’s wants, John felt compelled to take a more strictly authoritarian role with his son. When I asked him to elaborate on this, he responded,

She spoiled the kid, I mean, I told you before that I felt that I had to – that it was my role to push the pendulum to more strictness with him. Well, of course [he] went to [her] rather than me, and that was… So I lost my close contact with him fairly early on because of my insistence that he see some discipline in his life. So he knew how to play us and he did and she became his favorite because she would give him anything he wanted, and still does to this day. Sad. So I didn’t feel that I was ever allowed to fulfill my role, and that I wasn’t clever enough to get around that somehow. And that saddens me that I should have had the wherewithal to overcome that obstacle that was so obvious to me, but did not.

John’s story was marked by sadness at several points. For instance, John contrasted his own childhood love of building and creating with his son’s apparent disdain for such activity. “I wanted to be closer to him. And I wanted him – I think one of the things that I – I had great joy as a child making things and playing […] I was just a happy little kid. And my son was not. I would make him things that he really didn’t appreciate at all – a handmade leather marble bag, and just little things.” It was interesting to me that John seemed to want to create for his son the same kind of space that gave him such pleasure in his own youth. At one point, John said, “I would make or buy him anything I thought that he, that I would have loved to have when I was a kid […] But I couldn’t see the same interest and that saddened me.”

I asked John about his authoritative parenting style and how he felt it affected his relationship with his son. “I suppose I have to admit to regrets. There’s a lot of sadness with it. I’ve talked about the joy of expectations and early on I could take control and realize a lot of those expectations, but little by little I couldn’t anymore and I feel great
sadness in retrospect.” John told me that the real issue in his relationships was that he had somehow lost control. He said, “I wouldn’t have wanted it to be control where I dictated every aspect of everything that happened. Not that kind of control, but maybe more control of myself than control over him or my wife. I lost it somewhere along the line.”

Ultimately, John and his wife had become estranged over their lack of agreement about how to deal with an increasingly unruly son.

After [my son had] gotten out of high school […] he was on drugs by then, I think cocaine, and I didn’t know it. That’s how stupid I was. Not that I could have done anything about it. He came home in handcuffs so many times I had to get my own handcuff key. I’m only half joking about that. I’d say, “Well, we need to kick him out.” “Well we can’t.” I’d say, “It’s time to kick him out. Sink or swim.” “But we can’t. He’ll sink.” And it went on and on and on and it wasn’t until I’d left her that he went out on his own. He was forced to then.

I asked John about his feelings about how he fulfilled his role as a father and he told me, “I’m not going to go on living out the rest of my life angry with myself for not having played my role differently because I wasn’t certain how to play it, and no one knows. I did the best I thought I could at the time, which was not a good excuse. So I don’t know the answer to that. I only wish I had been smarter, more clever.” Still, our conversation did not end on a sour note. On the contrary, John informed me that his relationship with his son has grown and become stronger as the years have gone by.

John seemed pleased as he spoke to me about his son as he sees him now, and although there seemed to me to be sadness in John’s voice when he spoke of the past, there also seemed to be a sense of pleasure and hope. Speaking of his son, John said to me, “I’ve often wondered if he would have been different than he is if he would have felt differently toward me. And now we’re fairly close, but we’ll never have that. That’s
gone. That’s the thing that I can’t recoup. So I don’t really know.” John did not leave me with that thought, however. He went on to tell me that his son is a very good father by John’s estimation. He told me,

Talking about role models for his stepdaughter, he and his wife still cuddle. This is one of the strongest marriages I’ve ever seen. They rejoice in one another. And I think they’ll go to their deathbed with that feeling toward one another. And as far as role models, his daughter has seen this in them and he hopes that when it comes time for her to get married that she’ll see how love plays such a strong role and hope that she doesn’t make a mistake in her marriage.

I very much enjoyed speaking with John. His candor made several potentially awkward moments much lighter than they might have been had he seemed reluctant to speak about his painful memories. One thing that struck me with particular force during our conversation was the parallel I saw between his descriptions of the problems in his parents’ relationship and the problems in his own marriage and how, in each case, the problems seemed to revolve around the question of how to raise a son.

Chad’s Story

Chad is a Caucasian man in his late twenties. His appearance and attire suggested his membership in contemporary “punk” culture (e.g. tattoos and anarchy-related patchwork all over his clothing), but he was very soft spoken and sincere (two qualities I did not immediately associate with his appearance). At the time of our conversation his daughter, Jill, was around six months old. Although our conversation focused primarily on the birth of Jill, he told me that this was not actually the beginning of his experience as a father. His partner, Allison, has an older daughter, Cassie, from a previous relationship. “Cassie is not my biological child. When I started going out with Allison, she was 10 or
11 months old already.” His story also deals with his reflections on the dynamics of raising his biological child alongside a child who, although she is not his biological child, he considers his own.

Chad was very open with me and seemed happy to be able to retell and relive his experience of the pregnancy and birth. At several points in our conversation Chad wept openly. Although he apologized for these moments, during which he needed to pause to regain his composure, he also seemed to be somewhat proud of his willingness to allow himself to fully experience the powerful emotions that accompanied his tears.

Overall, my experience of this conversation was very positive. I felt that Chad’s story touched on several themes that I had encountered in my other conversations with fathers. I also got the sense from this conversation that Chad had spent a great deal of time and energy contemplating his role as a father, a sense that was supported by the complexity of his explanations about his feelings on the topic.

**Learning to be a Father in a Masculine World**

Chad’s characterized his development as a father as a process of self-discovery within a context of silence and not-knowing. As he told me, “It seems like there’s not much guidance about what you’re supposed to do if you don’t search it out on your own. And most men, I would suspect, don’t. So they’re just left out there.” Chad seemed to feel that today’s new fathers have little to no support and encouragement as they struggle to find their role.

In terms of overt or openly articulated wisdom about being a father, Chad had very little to speak of. Rather, Chad told me about the indirect ways in which he learned
about a father’s role, through observation and deduction. When I asked him to tell me about the people in his life who had modeled the father role for him his first response was to name his own father. He told me, “My father was somebody that was pretty steady, like, always there. Maybe not someone I could talk to all the time, but someone I knew would always have my back and always be there to protect me.” According to Chad, it was above all his father’s steady and reliable presence that characterized his role as a father. He went on to describe what his father’s presence in his life meant to him: “I guess [he was a] presence that was always comforting me, like a safety net kind of thing. So I guess that’s one core thing a father does […] It wasn’t so much like a buddy relationship. I was more like a presence that I wasn’t worried about. You know? I knew I could try anything and whether I proved myself or failed miserably, it didn’t matter. So I would have this comfort of him being there.”

Chad said that the significance of this “safety net” that his father’s presence provided was more important than whether or not their personalities were well matched. “My father definitely has his ways and views and stuff, but he was, outside of those things… Those were outside, like person-to-person differences than father-to-son differences.” I asked Chad if he considered his father’s style of parenting to be “good.” He responded, “Yeah. I mean, he definitely reared his ugly head once in a while, but whether that’s right or wrong, I won’t… I might say it’s wrong, but it definitely showed me certain things, aspects of his personality and I guess… Just growing up to be a person, too. How to deal with certain situations.”

Chad went on to tell me that his father was certainly a male role model, but that fatherhood, for him, is not limited to providing his child with an example of maleness.
My father, to me, was also a male role model, but to me, fatherhood isn’t that, because I have two daughters and I’m gonna be a male role model to them but not necessarily something that they’ll model themselves after [...] Every man they see after me, they’re going to compare them to me. So I think that’s still kind of connected to my first thought – just being this rock. I don’t have to worry about where I am in the world. I always have this person who will take care of me if I need him.

Again Chad seemed to return to the idea that the primary role of the father is to provide his children with a sense of stability and what might be called omnipresence. Still, Chad’s description of the father as a male role model does seem to be important insofar as it structures his children’s future assessments of other men.

Chad reiterated this theme when he responded to my question regarding other male role models in his own childhood. I asked him if there were any other men from whom he got some sense about what it meant to be a man and a father. He replied,

Definitely not in a positive light. I have two really good friends from childhood that were… like, one father… I went to his house every day, practically, to play and never saw his dad because he would be in watching fishing. He was never involved in anything we did, ever. And the other dad was an abusive-type father, so it was more like, “wow I have it pretty good,” you know? I think I was more influenced by everyone’s mom and my mom as far as outside my dad, you know? So, no. No positive reinforcement whatsoever.

Chad told me that, “seeing these other fathers has molded what I think of as fatherhood, as being a father, definitely. But it’s definitely more a kind of ‘what not to do’ thing than ‘what to do,’ you know?” Chad expressed sadness and consternation at the behavior of these other fathers. “It’s kind of a disheartening thing sometimes, to think that people can be like that to their kids.”

This realization, that there are fathers in the world who do not seem to want to be involved in their children’s lives, seemed to distress Chad. There were several times during our conversation in which this became the focus. In particular, Chad told me that
he could not understand how a man could not want to be involved in the birth experience. “The emotional part of it is kind of disconcerting to me as well, to think that fathers don’t have these kinds of emotions on this day of such an intense moment, you know? It’s kind of sad to think that they might miss something like that. I don’t doubt their love for their kids, but it seems like they’re definitely missing something when they’re not there for that.” When I asked Chad why he thought a man might not want to participate in the birth he said, “My guess is fear. Fear of what they might see or what they heard. Or just thinking they’re not being manly, or that it’s woman’s work.”

He went on to say that many men seem to be ruled by social attitudes reflecting the ideal man as stoic and disinterested. “I just think it’s just a masculine attitude – what they view as being a man, not showing your emotion, or… It seems like they’re scared of confronting that part of them, you know? Or maybe they’re scared that they won’t have that reaction.” In Chad’s estimation, many men simply do not realize that they have more freedom to fulfill their roles as men differently than the models from which they have learned. “I think it’s just that men have put themselves, generation by generation, into these emotional straight jackets and just aren’t allowed to budge from these kinds of things.”

Chad told me that he feels that the father’s relationship with the mother is often misunderstood as being one in which each has his or her responsibilities and these responsibilities are essentially separate and without overlap. Contrarily, in Chad’s view fathers and mothers are, “definitely partners… She’s carrying the brunt of it but it’s just like words like ‘we’re pregnant,’ not ‘she’s pregnant.’ I guess it’s just a mindset that some men are missing.”
Preparing for the Birth

Chad told me that, in his view, fatherhood does not begin at the birth. “You’re already a father, literally, once the cells start splitting, you know. It’s already started. Not at the birth do you become a father, you know? At least to me. I know it’s a mindset that already has started developing.” I found it interesting that, although Chad couched his explanation in biological terms, his philosophy of fatherhood seemed to me to have more to do with a man’s perception of himself as a father.

Chad told me that at first he really did not have any idea what the birth would be like. He also said that he did not feel at liberty to ask the men in his family for their input. “I didn’t talk to any of my uncles or my father or my grandfather. That would be unheard of, to talk to my grandfather about it, you know? So there wasn’t much I could glean from their experience.” Chad went on to say that although he did not know what to expect, the most important thing for him was that he had decided to be at the birth at all. “I wasn’t there for Cassie’s birth so I didn’t know a whole lot about what happens in the room, you know? But I had made the choice that I was going to be there.” He told me that it was very important to him that he did what he could to be involved in the pregnancy and birth, in part because his partner was giving so much of her self physically. “Allison is carrying this baby for nine months, it’s the least I could do to help her get the thing out, you know. So it didn’t even occur to me to not be in the room. So there was so much that I had to learn and read and feel Allison’s body and figure out how things are situated so I could be prepared for that. It’s such a huge undertaking.”
Chad’s process of preparing for the birth included attending classes with Allison and reading birth-related literature.

We read a couple books and magazines about different birthing methods – the dos and don’ts kind of thing. And we took Bradley method classes, which was a very... They call it partner-, or husband-, coached birthing. And that was a twelve-week course, so it was pretty long. And we discussed everything from episiotomies and the actual physical things that go into giving birth and the emotional roller coaster from the hormones that women go through. And we were reading pretty much every night in bed. I researched things and told her, and she would give me things. So as far as... On both sides it was an active learning process.

Chad did admit that the reading could be tedious at times. “There are so many boring books about birthing, it’s hard sometimes to not lose interest.” But it was the fact that he felt that he was doing what he could do that mattered to him. “I don’t have too much control over what going on, but what I do, I should have the knowledge and whatnot to do it. [...] I felt like I was a father already, you know? So that’s part of being a father – making sure your kid is safe and everything. I wanted to make sure that the fetus is growing, so I wanted to know what was going on there.”

Another large part of Chad and Allison’s preparations had to do with finding a common ground in terms of their birth plan. That is, they worked together to plan for the many possible contingencies at the birth. He told me that it was important to him that he and Allison were, “making sure we were on the same page at every step. Like, when the day came, as far as about drugs, and episiotomies, and alternatives to certain things that would make it easier for Allison, and all those things.” Among these considerations was the question of setting. Initially, Chad and Allison had decided on delivering their child in a birth center, but do to restrictions imposed by their medical insurance provider, they
ended up having to have the baby at Magee Women’s Hospital, which Chad later told me Allison referred to as “the baby factory.”

Chad told me that one very positive aspect of their pregnancy and birth was the presence of their midwife. “We had a midwife. We went through Penny Thomas who’s awesome. She definitely made it feel like… She’s the midwife for Allison, but she’s like my midwife too.” Chad felt that the midwife invited Chad to participate in the entire process of the pregnancy. “I could sit down with her and discuss these things. It wasn’t so much like, ‘all these things are happening to Allison.’ We could talk like it was happening to both of us. So it was really nice to be able to pass these ideas between the three of us and keep everybody on the same page about things.”

According to Chad, the pregnancy progressed normally and without major complications. It was not until Allison reached the end of the time frame for what is considered normal term (two weeks after the projected due date) that Chad and Allison had to deal with any serious challenges in the process.

**Being at the Birth**

When I asked Chad about the fears he might have had about the birth he told me that he only began to worry after the due date came and went.

Jill was two weeks late, and after a couple days you’re like… Allison was starting to get nervous, like, “what’s going on?” She had a little… she had scar tissue on her cervix so her cervix wasn’t dilating. It was effaced completely, but it wasn’t opening up. […] After a week we were kind of more worried. But the birth was only three and a half hours long because she was completely effaced but she wasn’t dilated at all.

The presence of scar tissue on Allison’s cervix brought about several medical interventions that Chad and Allison had initially decided against. “We got there at nine
in the morning. It was a scheduled thing because she wasn’t… She was having contractions, but two weeks was the cutoff. She was having contractions the whole time, but nothing uncomfortable. So they actually had to go in. They had scissors or tong-like things they stuck in there and just kind of opened them up. Stainless steel things.”

Chad told me that finding themselves forced to alter their plans to accommodate the demands of the situation was frightening. “One of the scary parts was that she had to go on Pitocin and take drugs to get the contractions going and that was something we had talked about and was a diversion from what we had talked about in the beginning.” At the same time, Chad seemed to me to feel that being confronted with a difficult decision and making it together strengthened the sense of connection between himself and Allison. “It was one of those things that we were comfortable with. This is one of those things that came up that we were like, ‘okay if this happens then, yes, we’re okay with that.’”

As I have mentioned already, Allison referred to the hospital as a baby factory. The couple’s sense of being in a factory-like setting during the birth was something they had, at least in part, prepared for.

We had Penny [our midwife], and she knew our birth plan and our philosophy about how we wanted to do it. But she warned us about the nurses in the hospital, so that was part of our mindset going in, was that, “yes I’m going to be here for Allison, but I also have to be like a security guard for her.” You know, to tell the nurses to get the hell out, or we’re not doing this. I had to be like a wall to make sure that their influence didn’t get into this. I mean, one of the first things the nurses said was that Allison was not going to be able to get through this without an epidural, like once she started the Pitocin. She said that right in front of Allison. She said, “Oh, you’re not going to be able to handle this.”

Chad’s feeling that he needed to protect Allison from the hospital staff appeared several times during our conversation. He told me that insensitive medical intervention was “one of the worries – that the staff would somehow enforce their will and just do the
garden-variety… Like pump you full of drugs and make you scream and do all these crazy things.” Chad said that he had a difficult time understanding how the hospital staff could follow what seemed to Chad to be very impersonal and insensitive procedures.

Since you’re in a hospital they can have all these rules and regulations. I don’t know. They act like it’s an appendectomy or something and it’s not. You don’t have to have all this equipment attached. Once we started to have these sorts of problems we had to have a constant baby monitor. Allison couldn’t get out of bed. While she was on the drugs to speed up the contractions they had to monitor her heart. And we didn’t really want that because she wanted to move around. […] It’s weird to think that in a place that births probably a dozen babies a day, that they are so impersonal and cold to families and kids.

During our conversation Chad seemed to be struggling with conflicting desires; on one hand, he was trying to describe for me how difficult it was for him to deal with the coldness and impersonality of the medical establishment; on the other hand, he seemed to be trying to find some forbearance for the hospital staff’s behavior.

I guess they have a different outlook on babies than we do. I had to kind of steel myself for that. So during the whole actual labor part of it I did have to hold back on a lot of stuff, you know. Just to make sure you’re doing everything right and make sure they’re not trying to interfere too much. And not get too upset or crazy in there […] in front of Allison. And just disrupt the whole vibe of the place and make Allison nervous and me mad and we wouldn’t enjoy the whole moment. It was hard. […] It was all the little things that aggravate you. It seems like they don’t care, and maybe they don’t. I don’t know. I can’t believe that they can just have a baby factory and not see the emotions in the mother and the father and whoever else is there and that doesn’t have any effect on them. I don’t want to make nurses and staff sound like cold human beings, but sometimes it felt like that.

Chad described for me his recollection of his involvement in the labor. He told me that Allison’s expectations and his own were very similar, in terms of what he would be doing during labor.

We talked about what I’d be doing the whole time. I guess on the physical level I would be there massaging her and doing all the things we learned in
the class. On the emotional level I guess it was that I was there with her the whole time, and sweating and crying and doing all the things she was doing. I mean, definitely not on the same scale, but I’m going through the emotions, too. I think… I don’t know if she expected that, but when we were there I think it made everything a lot easier.

Chad also told me that he thought that Allison expected him to be a steady and reliable presence at the birth, a person she could count on. When I remarked that that description reminded me very much of his description of the father’s role he responded, “Yeah, I guess for me it’s the same. Being a friend, being a partner.”

Chad’s role at the birth consisted largely of helping Allison with her moment-to-moment needs. “I was massaging her and was pretty much in the bed with her the whole time until she was actually pushing and the head started coming out. So I was helping her with different positions, just holding her and trying to help her do whatever she needed to do.” When Allison was ready to push, she and Chad again encountered resistance from the hospital staff. “Once we had gotten to the point where she felt she could push more we were like, ‘we don’t need the drug anymore so let’s cut it off.’ That was another aspect where the staff was like, ‘well, you know you’re not going to be able to push this baby out without the drugs.’” Chad expressed frustration that the healthcare professionals seemed not to mind or even realize that their response called the parents’ abilities into question.

As the baby emerged, Chad was surprised at the level of emotional intensity the experience involved for him. “The head started to show and we tried different sitting positions and the baby started to push. Allison had a mirror so she could actually see and feel the head too, and that was a pretty intense moment.” He told me that even though he had some sense of what the actual birth would feel like, the experience was stronger than
he had anticipated. “I couldn’t prepare myself for the intensity of it, but I knew to a point that I would be experiencing something like this.”

Continuing with his discussion about his expectations for the birth, Chad told me that, “as much as I’d learned, I probably didn’t expect what I actually saw, what actually happened. […] You can prepare a lot, but still it’s pretty eye-opening when it actually happens. Like an out-of-body experience.” I asked Chad to elaborate on his expectations and he said, “I guess my expectations of it were to be a pretty strong emotional event.”

Chad struggled to describe for me his experience at the birth.

Just crying and happiness and fear, all mixed together, you know? And it’s like… it’s hard to explain. It’s like getting a tattoo – you can’t tell someone how it’s going to feel. I know that’s a terrible comparison, but there’s no way that you can explain how you’ll feel, and everyone has, I guess, a different experience of it. I expected myself to be pretty, I don’t know… A little scared, a little apprehensive about a lot of things, but I felt I was prepared with a lot of knowledge about what was going on. I knew all the different steps and stages of birth and I felt like that was already… that that was the easy part.

When I asked Chad about his use of the term “out-of-body experience,” he told me that he experienced a sense of unreality. “Yeah. I don’t know. It was like I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes. I was holding a baby – Jill. And it didn’t feel real.” Interestingly, this sense of the experience not being real was accompanied by the recognition that the baby was, in fact, really here.

I guess I didn’t really think it was going to happen. I know it’s there but… Like, until you hear the first heart beat you don’t really believe it. You see this ultrasound and see the actual baby moving around and feel it. As soon as she was born I got… I don’t know how to describe it. Just more… You know, you realize that all this is real.

Even after the birth, Chad and Allison found themselves having to contend with the will of the hospital. Chad told me that he felt as if the hospital saw the baby as its
own while the family was under its roof. For instance Chad recalled that, “[the nurses were] weird about the baby sleeping with you in the bed. They came in and were like, ‘oh, the baby’s supposed to be in there.’ And we were like, ‘okay, we’re just laying here.’ And as they leave you just go back to what you were doing. And taking the baby away to do tests – I just felt sometimes like I was chasing the baby.” This feeling of being in conflict with the desires of the institution continued even to the point that the couple encountered difficulty as they tried to leave the hospital. Chad described feeling imprisoned. “Everything was fine afterwards – Allison was fine and the baby was healthy. There were no problems whatsoever. But we had to stay in the hospital at least 24 hours. And you have to get two consents, one from Allison’s doctor and one from a pediatrician to make sure they can both leave. So we had to jump through hoops to spring us from jail, basically.”

**Life With a New Baby**

Chad told me that the introduction of the new baby did not change the family’s routines all that much. “I already was in a father mode and helping along a toddler. So it wasn’t a big shift for me. I was already not going out. And I was already not sleeping very well. We already had a kid laying with us in the bed every night, so my comfort level was already gone. So it was definitely easier for me to make that shift.” When I asked Chad how he felt his presence at the birth influenced his relationship with Jill he told me,

It feels like… I feel like, because I did all the things I did – I was there the whole time and not just during the birth but leading up to it too – I don’t know… I just think we have that much better connection to each other. I don’t know if it affects my affection toward her, because I couldn’t
imagine not feeling this love toward my child, but maybe that is why I feel such a connection to her, because I went through this with her.

The unity Chad feels with Jill is important to him because of the rarity of such powerful experiences of connectedness with another person. “It’s a pretty strong, pretty powerful emotion to have that, because you don’t really have that with anybody else except maybe your mom.” He also told me that his connection to Jill is “definitely a different connection than I have with Cassie […] I still love both of them the same, but I have different experiences with them.” Chad reported that his management of many of the day-to-day responsibilities in the care of Jill has made their connection even stronger. “I stay home with her every day. I think I can do more with her and experience things at a greater level because I’ve been there from day one. It makes every facial tick or whatever that much more recognizable and better.”

In terms the impact of the birth on his relationship with Allison, Chad told me, “I think she feels more love between us because she can see it in my interactions with Jill. I guess it’s kind of the same for me too, when I see Allison nursing the baby or playing with the baby and that kind of… I know they have that bond too. It changes our relationship, I guess, because we have something more in common with each other than the peripheral things.”

Chad’s newfound understanding of and appreciation for the emotional and psychological connection between parent and child also deepened his knowledge of Allison. “I could see that part of her now. I knew she was a mother before, but now it’s a more real aspect of her.” At the same time, however, Chad feels that since much of their relationship has included the presence of children (Cassie), his relationship with Allison has not changed in some fundamental ways.
We already had a family situation already. We never really had just a dating period with two single people going out every once in a while and building up to this. She already had a kid. We went out a few times, but we also had the kid with us most of the time. And there was a lot of time, as we started seeing each other more, that I would be with the kid. So I think she already had a huge amount of trust in me.

Still, Chad realizes that the family has changed insofar as his role in it has solidified in a way in which it hadn’t before. “[Jill is] my child too, so we just share this bond between the three of us. I guess it’s a different kind of realization about how this family thing is supposed to work.”

Chad also described for me how he perceives the new dynamic between himself and Cassie now that Jill is in the family. “I think it might have brought us closer too, for the same reason I was saying about Allison because now she has a sister and I have a daughter that we both share. The two of us can enjoy what Jill does too.” Chad told me that his responsibilities toward Cassie have changed with the birth of Jill because Cassie’s status within the family has changed. “She was no longer the baby, you know? She was a big sister and now as a father I have to change modes with her […] I needed to start different strategies with her to get her to do certain things with the baby or act certain ways around the baby.” At the same time, Chad said he feels that it is important that he should, “try not to make [Cassie] feel excluded or anything like that.” Chad realizes that Jill’s presence has altered Cassie’s world just as it has altered the family dynamics. “It’s kind of a cool thing to get to be able to play with the baby but have Cassie there too, with us, and experiencing all those things with her as we go along. Chad’s seeing things for the first time and Cassie’s seeing things for the first time in that way, so it’s a completely different world for Cassie now too.”
Chapter Five
Cross-Conversation Analysis

In the previous chapter I presented narratives based on my conversations with five fathers from various backgrounds and situations. Naturally, each man’s story reflected his own perspective on fathering and childbirth and each was, to some extent, based on his own direct experience of his own child’s birth. The individual and idiosyncratic nature of these various stories notwithstanding, there were several themes that emerged during the narrative writing process that bear mentioning for the fact that each theme played at least a small part in more than one of the five separate conversations. In this chapter I will present the themes that appeared across multiple narratives. That I am focusing here on shared themes does not negate the importance of the individual differences from one story to the next. Quite the contrary, the presentation of shared themes makes the presence of individual experiences all the more significant insofar as they suggest the wide variance from one father’s experience to another’s.

As I mentioned in my discussion concerning my research method, although it is certainly tempting to make the inference that, because these themes are common across several accounts, they must represent some essential or constitutive aspects of all fathers’ experience, I will opt rather for the assumption that I cannot presume to extrapolate from what is true for a few fathers to what must therefore be true for all. Instead, I will simply make note that there is an interesting continuity to the overlapping themes that may or may not apply to any other father who might read this in the future. In that way I can hope to avoid presuming to speak for all fathers while, at the same time, possibly shed some light on other fathers’ experience.
Although this project began as an investigation into fathers’ experiences of their children’s births, what I found was that the actual birth experience was merely the focal point for a larger field of inquiry. While speaking with my participants, it quickly became clear to me that I could not limit my focus to the birth because each father’s experience of the birth depended heavily on their own process of growth into manhood and the influences of this process on their understanding of fatherhood in general. The themes I will present in this section reflect both these fathers’ philosophies on fatherhood and parenting and their experiences of their children’s births.

Before I begin my discussion of the themes, I will speak briefly about how these themes relate to each other within the larger context of fatherhood. The first themes I deal with concern the father’s relationship with the social field. This includes fathers in relation to other fathers and to the social discourse on fatherhood. Moving inward from the broader social milieu, I present several themes concerning the father’s relationship with the mother. These themes approach this relationship from several angles, such as how the roles of mothers and fathers relate and are defined, the significance of the collaborative process of parenting between mothers and fathers, and what the mother’s relationship with the child means for the father. Following the more socially- or relation-oriented themes I discuss the themes that deal specifically with fathers’ experience of childbirth. Included here are the experiences of ambivalence and derealization at birth. Finally, I focus on how fathers describe the intersection of childbirth and the social field in terms of being part of a hospital birth and how the medicalization of childbirth affects their experience of birth.
No One to Talk With

One of the themes that showed up in many of my conversations was the sense that these men did not feel they had an adequate opportunity to speak with other men about becoming and being a father.

It seems like there’s not much guidance about what you’re supposed to do if you don’t search it out on your own. -Chad
There was not any guidance from, like, my father or other people. -Chad
I can’t think of anybody else that I’ve talked to. -Chad
I think it’s important as a nation to get on the ball and have a consensus a little bit about what it means to be a father. I mean, I don’t want to say that everyone should have the same answer, but it would be nice to... I don’t know, bounce ideas off people. -Ethan

[There was] nothing in the way of “do this” or “do that” that I recall. No advice. I later got to the point where I would ask advice of close friends on how to deal with various issues as he grew up but no, at the time, none that I can recall. -John
No one really told me what to expect. I didn’t really ask anybody either. -Charlie
I don’t even know if my dad was present during the births of any of us. -Charlie
Many times a father could think that they’re alone in this. -Pablo
If fatherhood were addressed better by our - our communal mind. -Pablo
We were lucky that we have the sort of community who’s informed about birthing. -Pablo

From the above passages it is clear that each of the five fathers I spoke with had slightly different ways of conceptualizing this theme, although it is present for each of them. For instance, both Pablo and Ethan expressed their wish that there was more of a community interest in and awareness of fatherhood. And although for some, such as Charlie and John, there may have been people available with whom they could talk, neither of them reported having actually done so. Ultimately, the issue that remains consistent throughout each of the accounts is that these fathers felt that their coming-into-being as fathers happened without the benefit of a social network upon which they could rely and to which they could appeal if ever they felt the need to.
Another theme that seemed to resonate with each of my participant’s experience, and that has more to do with fathering and parenting in general than it does specifically with birth is the father’s desire to feel close to his children. Of course, by close I do not mean just a proximity to the child or a feeling of familiarity, although these are certainly aspects of this closeness. Rather, the men I spoke with told me of their desire to experience direct and immediate contact between themselves and their children. They also spoke of their experiences of this connection with great tenderness and warmth.

I feel such a connection to her, because I went through this with her, you know? And was there when she took her first breath and puked for the first time, and did all that nasty stuff that happens too. I feel like I’ll continue to be there for every step of the way. And I was there also when it all started. – Chad
I’ve heard people say that parenthood isn’t friendship, but I feel like I’m a friend to my child. – Ethan
I cuddle her and, like, hold her now like she’s a two year-old because she’s willing to take it. – Ethan
He became really the focus of my life, absolutely. Everything revolved around him. – John
I wanted to be closer to him […] now we’re fairly close, but we’ll never have that. That’s gone. That’s the thing that I can’t recoup. – John
I learned what absolute unconditional love at first second is. – Charlie
I don’t want to create this barrier of father and son as this learning dynamic, but I want it to be a friendship. – Pablo

Again, as with the previous theme, each of the fathers expressed this desire in his own way and from his own situation. Having spoken not only with younger fathers but also with a father who has already seen his child grow into adulthood (and become a father himself) I was fortunate to see an example of this wish for closeness from the vantage point of retrospection. For John, the wish for closeness to his son represents a kind of loss that my other participants all seemed to sense was one possible and
undesirable outcome. This sense of premonition, and the accompanying desire to make use of their time with their children translates directly into the next theme I will explore.

How Can I Help?

For many of the fathers I spoke with, the desire for closeness with their children corresponded directly with a fear of not being able to provide their children with what those children need.

You kind of feel like even if you’re not there, you at work or doing something, you feel like you should be there. It’s hard like you feel like you should be in two places at once. – Ethan

I only wish I had been smarter, more clever. – John

I’d have doubts. It was like, “What if I’m not meant to be a dad? What if I don’t fall in love with this kid?” – Charlie

My fear comes from thinking that I’m doing great but one day I might find out that I was lacking on a certain front and my child is suffering from that. – Pablo

One of my big fears is, having had this fatherhood event happen to me when I haven’t fully developed myself as an adult. – Pablo

For each of these fathers, the fear of not being able to provide for their children had nothing to do with material existence. On the contrary, the aspects of a child’s needs that these men were most concerned about were what might be called the intangibles of childrearing. For instance, Ethan found himself feeling torn between work and home because he felt that his child needed him to be there with her. For Charlie, his biggest fear had to do with whether or not he would be able to love his child as much as his child needed to be loved. And for Pablo this fear was oriented toward the relatively distant future in which he imagined that his son might turn out missing some essential aspect of his humanity because of some lack in Pablo’s fathering. Just as with the previous theme, John’s story provides an instance of a father who has seen his child grow into adulthood and his story reflects the realization of opportunities lost. He sees that (incidentally, as a
direct result of his lack of closeness with his son) he and his son cannot return to the past to close the rift that developed early in their relationship.

**To Be Maternal**

Not surprisingly, several of the themes that emerged in the course of this investigation had to do not only with fathers but also with their relationship with their children’s mothers. One theme in particular that I found rather interesting was the expressed desire to be more “motherly” in terms of the father’s responsibilities toward their babies.

“We’re pregnant,” not “she’s pregnant.” – Chad

I almost had a true wish that I could have breastfed him[…] I would have if I could. – John

I want to be going through what you’re going through. I want to share every moment of what you’re feeling because I know that this baby is as much mine as it is your and I wish that we could share the pain. – Pablo

I wish I had boobies [laughs] because right now it’s real hard for me to… she’s like… I can only settle Jaime down to some degree but then after that I’m hopeless. – Pablo

That fathers sometimes wish they could provide the kind of nurturance commonly attributed to the mother is not unheard of, although to some it may be surprising. As I mentioned in my review of fatherhood literature, this is actually a fairly common wish. What I did find of particular interest in terms of the men I spoke with was that this wish is not necessarily new. That is, while the fatherhood literature suggests in many places that the strong push for fathers to play a more active role in the care of their babies is a relatively new phenomenon (at least in the United States), the fact that John, a man whose child was born nearly fifty years ago, told me that he would have nursed his baby had he breasts at least hints at the possibility that this desire is not simply a trend
reflecting contemporary attitudes but may, in fact, reflect something more deeply rooted in the father’s psyche – a possibility I investigate further in the next chapter.

**What I Do, What You Do**

Another aspect of fathering relative to the mother that bears discussion is the father’s role relative to the mother, both at the birth as well as in terms of general parenting issues. One thing to note about the following selected quotes is that the fathers’ perspectives concerning the differences in the responsibilities of the father and the mother differ widely in some respects and are very similar in others. Nonetheless, I included this theme as one theme rather than making it several because, regardless of the variance from one father to the next, in each case the statements have to do with the father as he relates to the mother.

Allison is carrying this baby for nine months, it’s the least I could do to help her get the thing out. – Chad

I was there with her the whole time, and sweating and crying and doing all the things she was doing. I mean, definitely not on the same scale, but I’m going through the emotions, too. – Chad

To be outside of the room or just a token person in the room to watch is just hard to think of because it’s connecting with A but it’s also connecting with Allison. If I just would be sitting in the chair watching her struggle or do whatever she had to do it would seem like, “huh, this is your problem to deal with.” It just doesn’t seem right. – Chad

My guess is fear. Fear of what they might see or what they heard. Or just thinking they’re not being manly, or that it’s woman’s work. I mean that’s the ancient attitude but I still think it applies today. Like, “That’s my wife or girlfriend who’s giving birth and she’s the one who is pregnant.” They don’t think of it as both of them going through these things. And definitely partners... She’s carrying the brunt of it but it’s just like words like “we’re pregnant,” not “she’s pregnant.” I guess it’s just a mindset that some men are missing. And maybe when the baby’s brought out of the room they can be like, “oh yeah, that’s my baby. But we weren’t pregnant.” – Chad

It’s hard to consider those things when this is happening within the mother, and part of it’s her, you know? It’s her body and it’s happening there. – Ethan

I was equally responsible for feeding her as her mother. If not more, because I had more strength to do it. – Ethan
She wanted to breastfeed and she had the Le Leche League and other people helping her, and she tried her best. I can imagine, though she didn’t voice it so much, that it would be somewhat trying in some way that, you know, you’re trying to do something that you think is really important but the child can’t do it. So she was a little bit sad maybe. — Ethan

I feel like not growing up with a father I only got the one side sometimes. You know what I mean, like what the mother was going to do. And mothers aren’t willing to do as much without someone helping them. — Ethan

I was essentially the caregiver for this baby. I changed his diapers, I fed him[...] Feed him and clean him and bathe him—the I did all of these things. I was almost like a mother to this son[...]. I went beyond what I thought that society was telling me I should do as a father. I love this role so much. — John

She spoiled the kid, I mean, I told you before that I felt that I had to—that it was my role to push the pendulum to more strictness with him. — John

I’d say, “Well, we need to kick him out.” “Well we can’t.” I’d say, “It’s time to kick him out. Sink or swim.” “But we can’t. He’ll sink.” And it went on and on and on and it wasn’t until I’d left her that he went out on his own. He was forced to then. — John

My mom’s more emotional than my dad is by far. — Charlie

Through her whole pregnancy it was like she was pregnant but she was excited about it, and I was... I wasn’t not excited about it, but I wasn’t emotionally attached. — Charlie

She’s pregnant, we’re going to have a baby, and then my part starts. — Charlie

A pregnant woman already is forming a bond and an attachment and falling in love with her child. — Charlie

I went to as many of her appointments as I could with her, you know. And I wanted to be part of it, but I didn’t really know how to be part of it. And so it was kind of like the feeling of tagging along. — Charlie

Your mother brings you into the world and she’s your protector and it’s all sort of emotional energy and it’s like... and then, you know, I imagine later in life when you start having different kinds of concerns many times your father’s the only person who can help you with that. — Pablo

I can only settle Jaime down to some degree but then after that I’m hopeless. I imagine that there will be a time later when I’m the only one that can help him in a different kind of realm—and I think that’s important with fatherhood—that the father is always a complementary figure to the mother. — Pablo

Helping however I can because basically, at that point, a father could feel like there’s nothing for him to do. — Pablo

Everything that Marie’s going through can be either really awesome or really traumatic, you know what I mean? And I think that the support of the father at that time is essential. — Pablo

“I want to be going through what you’re going through. I want to share every moment of what you’re feeling because I know that this baby is as much mine as it is your and I wish that we could share the pain.” And I think that was a big motivator for me to try to be involved, to know that she was doing this big part of the job for our baby. And so that just by inertia I had to do a part of the job that was equally painful, just not in the same way. — Pablo
We can’t do that part. We don’t have boobs, and when he, or she, is crying he’s going to go back to the mom. – Pablo

The mother sort of brings the world into this terrestrial realm, and the mother is embracing in a very developmental stage of a human. And then, when the kid is kind of looking up, into all these other issues... I think that my role, my pain... I think my vaginal pain is going to come when the child becomes a boy, and when the boy becomes a man. And the same thing for a girl. – Pablo

Right now, I can’t do the job that Marie’s doing. But later I’ll have a job of my own that no one else can do. – Pablo

A mother’s concerns are many times more immediate. Marie is having to worry about how he’s feeling, is he eating enough, is he feeling protected and comfortable, is he having the right kind of eating and sleeping cycles; he’s demanding a lot of attention right now, and I can give that attention, but only so much of it. But I think that fathers would generally probably be more concerned about the later issues. – Pablo

One of the common attitudes that many of my participants expressed in terms of the father’s responsibilities to the mother was the sense that, because the mother is responsible for the difficult and sometimes dangerous task of bearing and delivering their child, the father ought to do everything in his power to assist her in her own tasks. This responsibility applied both to the birth itself as well as to day-to-day parenting. For instance, Chad felt that it was only right to show Allison his support by trying to be fully engaged both physically and emotionally at their daughter’s birth. In this way, he hoped to share some of Allison’s burden. Similarly, Pablo seemed to feel that Marie would not only appreciate his active participation in the birth but would actually have an easier and more rewarding experience because of it.

On the contrary, Charlie’s comments suggest that even though he tried to participate in the pregnancy and birth, he found himself more in the role of a bystander than of an actor. He was performing the function he thought was expected of him but he did not seem to me to feel that his role was necessary or particularly beneficial. For Charlie, the father’s role and the mother’s are simply different and do not overlap in this
way. In other words, the mother is responsible for the birth and providing most of the early emotional aspects of a baby’s care while the father is waiting in the wings for his moment to become more essential to his child’s later, more cognitive, development. I found it interesting that while Chad said to me that he feels that the pregnancy is a phenomenon that the mother and father share (“our pregnancy”), Charlie said precisely the opposite (“her pregnancy”). Both Pablo and Charlie seemed to feel that a father’s role becomes more immediate as the child grows older and needs a different kind of nurturance.

These differences notwithstanding, all of the fathers I spoke with, with the exception of John, told me of their deep gratitude and respect for their partners for what they perceived to be the very difficult responsibilities of the mother. John’s account, and his scorn for what he perceived to be his partner’s refusal to fulfill her motherly responsibilities only serve, in my mind, as the exception that, in this case, proves the rule.

**Working as a Team**

One more theme concerning fathers in relation to mothers and that spanned all of my conversations was the belief in the importance of a strong, collaborative relationship between the parents.

> On both sides it was an active learning process. – Chad
> We could talk like it was happening to both of us. So it was really nice to be able to pass these ideas between the three of us and keep everybody on the same page about things. – Chad
> I was there with her the whole time, and sweating and crying and doing all the things she was doing. I mean, definitely not on the same scale, but I’m going through the emotions, too. I think... I don’t know if she expected that, but when we were there I think it made everything a lot easier. – Chad
For me it’s the same. Being a friend, being a partner. – Chad

It changes our relationship, I guess, because we have something more in common with each other than the peripheral things […] and it makes the relationship stronger, not just personally, but subliminally or whatever. – Chad

I was equally responsible for feeding her as her mother […] she appreciated it, you know? That I was willing to do it. – Ethan

I feel like the world works like you have fathers, you have mothers, and you have children, and everything kind of flows around that. And being a good father is about the most important thing you can do, other than being a good husband. I mean, you have to be a good husband to be a good father. – Ethan

There wasn’t really very much between us in terms of preparing for this child. – John

I didn’t see that most fathers, for example my brother-in-law, my wife’s sister’s husband was absolutely not into it at all. He wanted nothing to do with the kids until they were old enough to wipe their own fannies. – John

I lost my close contact with him fairly early on because of my insistence that he see some discipline in his life. So he knew how to play us and he did and she became his favorite because she would give him anything he wanted. – John

This is one of the strongest marriages I’ve ever seen. They rejoice in one another. And I think they’ll go to their deathbed with that feeling toward one another. And as far as role models, his daughter has seen this in them and he hopes that when it comes time for her to get married that she’ll see how love plays such a strong role. – John

The family being an important unit rather than something that’s just throw away. Because half the people anymore today seem to take it as a, “well, we can try.” You know, and you’ve got all these kids from broken up families and stuff like that. – Charlie

If there are fights or arguments or stuff like that, still we are always trying to figure out how to solve them rather than, you know, “oh I don’t even know why we should be together.” – Charlie

I see Marie, and myself as very close in terms of our mission. – Pablo

Marie, to me, represents a lot of the aspects of myself that I haven’t explored and vice-versa, you know. I think we teach things to each other all the time. And we sort of remind each other of who we are and who we want to be and who we are not and… The most important thing about that to me is that whatever image we create for a child, as parents, it’s also that we connect it to the image that we have as a couple. – Pablo

Everything that Marie’s going through can be either really awesome or really traumatic, you know what I mean? And I think that the support of the father at that time is essential. – Pablo

In each and every conversation I had with these fathers I heard several examples that spoke to the belief in the importance of a strong relationship between partners. Even John, who as I mentioned above does not feel that his relationship with his wife was a particularly good one, when telling me about his son and daughter-in-law, spoke very
highly of their obvious devotion to one another and the positive affect that devotion has on their daughter.

**What Do I Do Now?**

A theme common to all of my participants’ experience of the birth itself, and which is consistent with the other themes I have discussed so far, is the experience of not knowing what to expect. Of course, the fact that these fathers did not know what the birth experience would hold for them prior to that actual event may not be, in itself, particularly surprising. Arguably, many mothers, first-timers as well as seasoned veterans, still have plenty of room for surprises when labor begins. Still, this theme fits with what we have already seen as a dearth of other men with whom expectant fathers can speak and learn about birth. It is not too difficult to see a direct correlation between these two particulars of my participants’ experience.

As much as I’d learned, I probably didn’t expect what I actually saw, what actually happened. – Chad

The expectations were, oddly enough, to the best of my recollection true to what actually happened. – John

I had great expectations, most of which didn’t come to fruition. – John

I think my expectations were way lower than what actually ended up happening. – Charlie

I was kind of freaked out about it, didn’t know what to expect. – Charlie

I wanted to be there, but at the same time, I had no idea what to expect. – Charlie

It’s nothing that we could expect before. You know what I mean? It’s all sort of coming to us and […] we make the decisions as we go. – Pablo

Just as in several of the themes I have touched upon previously, John’s account runs somewhat counter to my other participants’ accounts. Here, however, it is important to note that when John describes his expectations for the birth he does so from a clinical perspective that deals only with the biological components of the event. The other
fathers refer to the emotional intensity that accompanies their experience of the physical process of parturition.

**Feeling Two Ways at Once**

The absence of available advice from other, more experienced, fathers and the resultant ignorance of the birth experience to which these fathers testify to having experienced leads directly into another experience that runs through many of my conversations. All of the men I spoke with told me that they experienced some ambivalence as fathers. While most of these instances had to do with the birth event itself, this feeling of ambivalence was not limited to the birth, but appeared more than once in relation to the experience of raising a child.

> Crying and happiness and fear, all mixed together. – Chad
> A little scared, a little apprehensive about a lot of things. – Chad
> It was happy because I was happy to be a father, but there was a lot of anxiety and unknowing and a lot of sadness I think also, and some hope. I don’t know, it was very… there were a lot of emotions. It wasn’t one solid emotion. – Ethan
> There was, like, excitement, hope, feeling good, and then there was, like, fear, and anxiety, and I think some shame. – Ethan
> I suppose I have to admit to regrets. There’s a lot of sadness with it. I’ve talked about the joy of expectations and early on I could take control and realize a lot of those expectations, but little by little I couldn’t anymore and I feel great sadness in retrospect. – John
> I wanted to be there, but at the same time, I had no idea what to expect and I wouldn’t call it nervousness as much as general discomfort. I wasn’t comfortable being in there. – Charlie
> I was crying and laughing at the same time, I mean I didn’t, I don’t know. It’s just that overflowing of emotion where you can’t really even put it into words in the least little bit. – Charlie

While I must point out that in each case, the fathers I spoke with were, on the whole, very positive when describing their experience of becoming and being fathers, the fact that their experience was laced with feelings of sadness, shame, discomfort, fear, and
so on is significant. It is clear is reading the transcripts of these conversations that for each father, the experience of fatherhood is complex and not easily articulated. Many times I heard these men struggling to describe for me feelings that they felt could not be adequately described in words. What this suggests to me is the absence of an appropriate vocabulary for fathers to speak of their experiences.

Is This Really Happening?

For several of these fathers, being present at an event for which one has little preparation, few insights, and no real lingua franca to aid in its articulation as an experience translated into a feeling of derealization. Several times during our conversations I heard fathers tell me that they did not experience the baby or the pregnancy as real. In each case, it was not until the completion of delivery of the child that that child became real for them.

It was like I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes. I was holding a baby - Pablo
And it didn’t feel real, you know? I guess I didn’t really think it was going to happen. I know it’s there but... Like, until you hear the first heart beat you don’t really believe it. You see this ultrasound and see the actual baby moving around and feel it. As soon as she was born I got... I don’t know how to describe it. Just more... You know, you realize that all this is real. - Chad

I remember looking and was like if she doesn’t hold her someone’s got to hold her and it was like I immediately realized this was my child and it’s upon me to take care of this child, you know? - Ethan

It wasn’t really real to me. Just through her whole pregnancy it was like she was pregnant but she was excited about it, and I was... I wasn’t not excited about it, but I wasn’t emotionally attached because I had never been... I had no idea what to expect. - Charlie

It’s like in that very second, it was real. And it wasn’t until then. - Charlie
Emotionally, that is the second that it just became real. - Charlie
I will have more to say about the connection between language and the experience of reality and how the absence of a suitable vocabulary or discourse influences the experience of the real in the next chapter.

_Who’s in Charge Here?_

One final theme that I will discuss in this chapter is the dynamic of birth as experienced within the context of a hospital and the accompanying medical/clinical discourse. Each of the fathers I spoke with had something to say about hospital birth. In many cases, the fathers tried to describe their interaction with hospital staff in as positive a light as they could while at the same time expressing their frustration and dissatisfaction with what they perceived to be the attendant negative effects of birthing in a medical setting.

She warned us about the nurses in the hospital, so that was part of our mindset going in, was that, “yes I’m going to be here for Allison, but I also have to be like a security guard for her.” – Chad

One of the first things the nurses said was that Allison was not going to be able to get through this without an epidural, like once she started the Pitocin. She said that right in front of Allison. She said, “Oh, you’re not going to be able to handle this.” – Chad

That was one of the worries – that the staff would somehow enforce their will and just do the garden-variety... Like pump you full of drugs and make you scream and do all these crazy things. – Chad

But since you’re in a hospital they can have all these rules and regulations. I don’t know. They act like it’s an appendectomy or something and it’s not. – Chad

It’s weird to think that in a place that births probably a dozen babies a day, that they are so impersonal and cold to families and kids. – Chad

That’s what Allison calls it, the baby factory. – Chad

They are weird about the baby sleeping with you in the bed. They came in and were like, “oh, the baby’s supposed to be in there.” – Chad

Taking the baby away to do tests – I just felt sometimes like I was chasing the baby. – Chad

There were no problems whatsoever. But we had to stay in the hospital at least 24 hours. And you have to get two consents, one from Allison’s doctor and one from a pediatrician to make sure they can both leave. So we had to jump through hoops to spring us from jail, basically. – Chad
Once we had gotten to the point where she felt she could push more we were like, “we don’t need the drug anymore so let’s cut it off.” That was another aspect where the staff was like, “well, you know you’re not going to be able to push this baby out without the drugs.” – Chad

The pregnancy didn’t seem so much our own. It seemed like we were doing things on other people’s time and other people’s energy. You know, it didn’t seem like our experience any more in some ways because we needed so much help from other people, the medical field, I guess – the medical establishment. – Ethan

The doctor, in a moment of complete rudeness, called over one of the medical students and started talking about the degree of it and what was happening in front of us as if we weren’t in the room. – Ethan

I didn’t feel like I had rights in some ways. – Ethan

I’m asking them to check on my child, in a sense, and like to do things. Like, you’re meeting with heart surgeons, you’re meeting with other specialists, you know what I mean? They’re gonna save your child, so you feel slightly indebted to them. I mean, I do. Because she’s alive and they saved her. – Ethan

At one point they decided they needed to break the water, which I’m not sure why they needed to do that. But I really felt like I was turning over to an authority who was more equipped to deal with what I was going through. – Ethan

The mood of the nurse or the doctor was not important to us, you know? Whether they were pushy or whether they weren’t wasn’t important to us. – Ethan

She really started pushing that we should have the epidural. And we held off and held off and at some point this doctor came in and I don’t know if he was a geneticist or what, but he gave us this, like, poured all this possible bad news on us like, “you might not recognize the child, the child might have all these problems, I just want you to be aware.” And it was so out of hand. Like there was no reason why this man should have come in and said that. – Ethan

It was totally out of hand. And I think that offset the tone and my girlfriend, Hanna, agreed to have the epidural. – Ethan

The child was taken cesarean after almost 24 hours of labor. Why he couldn’t have determined by her small pelvis that it should have happened earlier I don’t know. – John

Nowadays I could have picked him up right away. But that was not allowed. – John

The baby was born really quick but they kept us in the hospital. They didn’t want to let us go for 18, what was it, 22 hours after she was born before they finally released us. She was born in the morning and they could have let us go that evening but they were like, “no, why don’t you stay another night.” But we just wanted to go home. It sucked, like being stuck in a hotel room. – Charlie

The nurses kept trying to push me out of the way and Ann kept saying, “stay here,” and so I’d stay there and the nurses were having to work around me. They were getting irritated, I could tell, but, you know, screw them. It’s not about them. – Charlie

The hospital staff, some of them were really cool and some of them really weren’t, you know? And they were annoyed that I was standing there right in their way. – Charlie

Ann’s like, “uh uh, I’ve got to push, I’ve got to push.” And the nurse is going, “No. You can’t push. You’ve got plenty of time.” – Charlie
You could ask for this bed that you can press a remote control and it moves you back and forth and you could be watching sports on television and have someone take your baby away from you and, well first of all, dope you up, [laughs] and then take your baby away from you and measure him and cut him up and all this shit that… it’s bad. – Pablo

I feel like, if I would have gone from scratch, I would have said, “Let’s go to the hospital.” You know? – Pablo

I think that if we would have gone to the hospital we would have had a horrible experience, compared to the magical experience we had from being at home. – Pablo

The inordinate number of quotes I was able to include on this one theme points to the significance of this issue for the men I spoke with. Contained within these various passages are many individual feelings that orbit the singular notion that there is a conflict inherent in the relationship between the medical establishment and the birthing community. For instance, Ethan described feeling like the experience was no longer his own but that it now belonged to the medical staff. Chad felt like he had to “spring” his family from “jail.” And Charlie felt like he and his family were stuck in a “hotel room.” In all of these instances, the implicit suggestion was that these men did not feel “at home” in their situation. They were outsiders in what amounts to a pivotal life experience.

These remarks stand in direct contrast to Pablo’s account of his experience of homebirth – a realization that Pablo comments on. Even John, who’s account has often been the counterpoint to my other participants’ stories related to many of the themes I have discussed in this chapter, describes the scene of his son’s birth as a very clinical space in which he was not allowed to hold his newborn child until after the staff had performed their various tests and examinations.


**Discussion**

**Chapter Six**

**The Problem of Identity**

“Everywhere, wherever and however we are related to beings of every kind, we find identity making its claim on us” (Heidegger, 1969, p.26).

When I began this project and started to research the issues related to fatherhood and childbirth I quickly discovered that fatherhood is much too broad a notion to try to execute an exhaustive study of in the scope of a doctoral thesis. In order to present a review of the relevant literature surrounding and concerning itself with fatherhood issues and with fathers’ participation in childbirth I needed to limit my interests to only a few major topics. In particular, I focused on how social attitudes and representations of fatherhood have changed over the course of the last fifty or so years. I also discussed how changes in the practice of labor and delivery in the United States have influenced the dynamics between fathers and mothers within the context of birth. Needless to say, there was much that I read that did not make it into my review of the literature.

As I compiled my data for this thesis by conducting conversations with fathers I could not help but notice early on that many of the issues that these men seemed most concerned with had to do with some of the subjects that I was, during my review of the literature, unable to deal with. In this chapter I will attempt to bring into dialogue the themes that emerged in the course of my analysis of the transcribed conversations with both the issues that I pointed out in my literature review as well as some additional concerns that have shown themselves to be more relevant to this discussion than I had previously thought they would be.
In order to present all of the various issues that surround the twin topics of fatherhood and childbirth in a consistent and coherent way I have chosen to structure my discussion around a single, overarching theme. Lurking within each of the myriad possible areas of concentration in this discussion is the issue of identity. More precisely, the problem that arose over and over for me as I read through my transcripts and the relevant literature is the problem of identity. How does a man’s identity change as he becomes a father and what are the variables that influence this identity transformation? In structuring my discussion with the issue of identity formation, maintenance, and alteration as its locus I will not only be able to address some of the important facets of the experience of becoming a father, but I will also be able to do so in a way that takes these issues out of a strictly academic perspective and moves them into the realm of praxis. In other words, it is my intention that this strategy will make it easier to locate possible points of intervention in this society’s dominant discourse to better accommodate the “new father.” Before starting in on a discussion of how the themes that emerged through my analysis of my participants’ narratives can be understood in light of a struggle for identity, it is, of course, necessary to devote some time to the consideration of precisely what one means when one speaks of identity.

So, what is identity? In a very basic and concrete sense, one’s identity can be defined as her or his demographic “facts.” For instance, my name is Nick. I live in Pittsburgh, so I am a Pittsburgher. I am a student of psychology. I am a Caucasian man in my early thirties. And on and on. With each additional fact about myself I inscribe another set of factors that make me more like some people while, at the same time, making me more unlike others. But this description of identity as factuality fails to take
into account the psychological dimensions of identity, either in terms of my own self-
perception or of my relatedness to others.

Perhaps the most important aspect of identity in terms of this particular discussion
is the fact that, above all, it is changeable. That is, when we speak of identity, we are
speaking not so much about “identity” as a static feature of the self but rather as a process
of identification that changes with one’s situation, a snapshot of which one could call
“identity.” In fact, we might say that one’s identity is characterized by the sum total of
all of a person’s various identifications at a single moment. What identity amounts to,
then, is a momentary configuration of a multiplicity of involvements that, together, create
a sense of a person(ality) as a whole. Identity is, in other words, a gestalt.

One of the key elements of identification is its relationship both to belonging and
to alienation. Kaplan (1976) remarks that, “identification involves a sense of
membership: in a species, a nation, or a family, for instance. Membership implies
differentiation from other membership groupings” (p.160). Take for instance the new
father’s situation: the man who was not a father had an identity that, regardless of every
other aspect, made him a member of that group of men who are not fathers; now this
(same?) man’s identity is different in a way that makes him part of a different group –
fathers – and forces him out of his previous membership. What is true of becoming a
father, however, that cannot necessarily be said of many other changes in one’s situation
is that, in becoming a father, his relationship to every other aspect of his situation also
changes. As Reed (2005) states, “fatherhood is a fundamentally new identity: a new way
of feeling, thinking, and being in the world […] procreation creates a new identity that
conforms to men’s new and renewed relationships in society” (pp.16-7).
Developmental psychologist Erik Erickson (1965), speaking of the adolescent struggle between identity and role-confusion, argues that, “in no other stage of the life cycle […] are the promise of finding oneself and the threat of losing oneself so closely allied” (p.11). But I would counter that becoming a father may be precisely that other stage in the life cycle where the same could be said. In fact, Erickson’s “generativity versus stagnation” stage in middle adulthood pertains to this issue. It is at this time in a man’s life in which he faces the challenge of “giving something back” to the world that fostered him in his youth. This often takes the form of caring for the next generation (i.e. his children). But it also entails finding new ways to define himself in terms of his relations to others. We have already seen evidence that many men report feeling lost in their new role as father, and it certainly makes sense in light of Reed’s suggestion that the new father is grappling with a new identity both in his own self-perception as well as in the eyes of others. Rather than resolving any previous sense of alienation this man may have felt because of his identity, fatherhood simply alters all of his relationships, responsibilities, and recasts the consequences of failing to live up to those responsibilities. As Kaplan argues,

As […] existential factors change, the criteria by means of which goals (and individuals) are evaluated change also. We change both the problems that people face and the potential solutions that attend them. But we can never eliminate problems and the potential alienation that new identifications will make relevant to the human condition. (1976, p.161)

Thus, new fathers often find themselves in the compromising position of having to (re)discover themselves at the same time as they are learning how to care for another being in a way that they have probably never been called upon to do. Coupled with this, as we have seen, American society is only now just beginning to recognize fathers’ new
role in a positive and supportive light (some argue this is actually still far off). Using this image of the father’s situation, I will commence to examine the ten themes of which I spoke in the cross-conversation analysis in relation to the father’s challenge of forming a new identity.

Ambivalence & the Mythic Father

A logical starting point for a discussion of identity and fatherhood is his representation in what might be called the mythic mind and how the father’s role in the formation of the psyche has been portrayed. Probably the most notable figure that has contributed to the Western view of the mythic father is Sigmund Freud. Freud had much to say about the significance of the father in personality formation and the persistence of the imago of the father in the human psyche (particularly as a source of torment and self-consciousness).

Freud introduced the Western mind to the notion of a primal father who begat all the sons who would later become fathers themselves and carry on his legacy. In the Freudian mythos this man was the patriarch of the “primal horde.” He ruled over all the other members of the tribe with absolute sovereignty and claimed all women as his own. According to this story, the father was a tyrant whose despotism led the young men of the horde to kill and consume him. In their guilt, these men elevated their now deceased father to the status of the divine and worshipped him. “One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde […] and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their
identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength” (Freud, 1950, p.176).

Although the likelihood that Freud’s primal scene is an historical fact is dubious, as a parable it works to illustrate Freud’s characterization of the psychic conflict the father’s existence poses for his children, and particularly for his son(s). He points out that the father is represented in many mythical stories as a source of fear and tyranny. For instance, in The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud (1991) describes, “an unpleasing picture of the father’s despotic power and of the ruthlessness with which he made use of it. Kronos devoured his own children, just as the wild boar devours the sow’s litter; while Zeus emasculated his father and made himself ruler in his place” (p.357). The image Freud presents is not only of a despicable and too-powerful ruler in the figure of the father, but also of a catalyst that induces his progeny into violence and, consequently, into guilt over their crime. Thus, when the primal horde establishes a social order that prohibits the slaying of the totem associated with the deified father, the result for the father is that, “the taboo does not only pick out the king and exalt him above all common mortals, it also makes his existence a torment and an intolerable burden and reduces him to a bondage far worse than that of his subjects” (Freud, 1950, p.64).

For Freud, the legacy of the primal father can be seen in the human imagination as the embodiment of those forces outside of one’s self that cannot be competed with. “A man makes the forces of nature not simply into persons with whom he can associate as he would with his equals – that would not do justice to the overpowering impression which those forces make on him – but he gives them the character of a father” (Freud, 1961, p.17). And Freud goes even further in his extrapolation of the father’s power and its
place in the human psyche to account for religion. “Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipal complex, out of the relation to the father” (1961, p.43).

The implication of Freud’s depiction of the father as a tyrant and a ruthless despot, coupled with his children’s (read: son’s) hatred and violence toward him, presents an interesting problem in terms of the forging of a new father’s identity qua father. Even were we to assume that Freud’s primal horde is simply a useful device for illustrating the vicissitudes of the father-child relationship via narrative we would still be left with the sense that the existence of the father is problematic, particularly insofar as he represents the limit of the child’s agency and power. Of course, since at this point we are still considering the father from a mythical standpoint, we can understand that the father himself, through this complicated shift from original persecutor to deified symbol of collective resentment and guilt, no longer exists except as a boundary marker in the psyche. As Fink (1995) argues,

> The father as boundary […] occupies no area: he defines a two-dimensional surface within his boundaries, but fills no space. This father who marks the limit of a man’s manhood is not just any old father: Lacan associates him with the primal father presented in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, the father of the primal horde, who has not succumbed to castration and supposedly controls every single woman in the horde. While all men are marked by symbolic castration, there nonetheless exists or persists one man to whom the phallic function does not apply, one man who was never put in his place by succumbing to symbolic castration. He is not subject to the law: he is his own law” (p.110).

Here we can begin to understand that, at least insofar as he is characterized by Freud (and, later, to some extent by Lacan), the father represents both a real and concrete limitation to the range of the child’s agency and ability to exercise its power in the world.
(i.e. its ability to seek gratification as it sees fit), as well as being above or outside of those same limitations himself.

How does the portrayal of the father in this dual role translate into a discussion on identity? First, it is interesting to note that, although Freud and Lacan had much to say about the role of the father in the formation of the child’s psychic mechanisms (namely, the Superego), neither had much to say about the impact of this psychological dynamic in terms of how it affects each man as he becomes a father himself. It is clear from this image of the father why the child might feel some ambivalence toward him for his role in establishing limits on his child’s ability to act on its desires in the world while at the same time representing the safety the child depends upon. Strangely enough, however, Freud paid precious little attention to the significance of the fact that each man who finds himself grappling with becoming a father in his own right was, first of all, a child who, according to this view of the father, must feel some resentment toward his own father precisely for fulfilling the father’s role in his son’s psychological development by saying, in effect, “No!” Thus, we can understand that the issue of becoming a father is complicated by the promise that, “a son’s picture of his father is habitually clothed with excessive powers of this kind, and it is found that distrust of the father is intimately linked with admiration for him” (Freud, 1950, p.63).

This complicated dynamic between father and child appeared several times in my conversations with my participants. For instance, when Pablo described his relationship with his own father, he began by telling me that his father is authoritative and domineering. According to Pablo, his father’s advice about becoming a father amounted to a series of ominous warnings of imminent doom and suggesting that his own way was
better than Pablo and Marie’s. At the same time, Pablo acknowledged that his own idea of being a father includes to some extent a desire to be authoritative. Furthermore, Pablo also told me that, as he made the transition into fatherhood himself, his relationship with his own father transformed into something else in which each man found in the other some reflection of his own situation as a father with fatherly concerns and this gave the two of them a new context within which they could begin to understand each other in a different (and arguably a more positive) light. Likewise, Chad described his relationship with his father as one in which, although his father could be overbearing, Chad felt that he was always supported by his father’s strong and abiding presence in his life.

Given that, for many men the process of becoming a father is laden with ambivalence, we must consider the implications of this ambivalence in terms of how it relates to their process of identification with the father’s function. What does it mean for the newly-minted father that he finds himself faced with the realization that he is embarking on a project that will, in all likelihood, require him to continually thwart his own children’s attempts to establish their own sovereignty in the world?

Since the time that I learned that I was to become a father I have continually (some might even say obsessively) evaluated my situation. In many cases, and particularly regarding this issue, I have found myself in a double bind. On one hand, I know that I am my children’s protector and provider. I am required to provide guidance and support as my children develop and begin to explore the world beyond the boundaries of our family and our home. Meanwhile, because my children’s explorations often entail encountering new ideas and new ways of seeing and being in the world that are at times quite different from my own worldview, their own process of identity
formation sometimes challenges the basis of the reality I have based my life and my teachings on.

Now, even though I endeavor to be thoughtful and recognize the necessity of this process that my girls must go through as they grow and develop, there still remains the immutable fact that, since I am trying to fulfill my obligation to teach them about the world from my own limited perspective I am bound to discover that they will not see things as I see them. My task is, ultimately, rendered hopeless insofar as I discover that I have neither the power nor the wisdom to create in my girls the ideal image of a person that carries on their father’s legacy without regard to their own desires and proclivities.

Thus, upon becoming a father, I had to decide how to navigate these treacherous waters. Many times I have asked myself, “How can I help to guide these girls safely through the challenges of youth while, at the same time, allowing them the latitude to explore, wonder, and even fall (both figuratively and literally) from time to time?” Of course I could choose to take on this role with faith in my absolute authority and righteousness. When they ask me why they cannot have some candy (“Other kids get lots of candy, dad!”) I could simply respond, “Because I said so,” and leave it at that. In this case, I may discover that, while I ensure that my children could not possibly misunderstand my version of reality (that I am in charge so I get to make the decisions), I have failed to recognize the importance of being able to let that surety go for their sake. The ambivalence inherent in finding the balance between being my daughters’ support, lifting them up to see that the horizon extends far beyond the purview of my own kingdom, and being the tyrant who stands in the way of my children’s forays into that world beyond, demand a tremendous sacrifice. In the course of rearing my children I
find myself asked many times to surrender my own sure footing, my belief in the stable image of reality I have created for myself, for the sake of my daughters’ own inquiries into the mystery of existence.

**My Father My Friend**

That the men I spoke with all expressed the desire to feel close to their children came as no surprise. As a father myself I can attest that this wish is consistent with my own experience. Referring back to my discussion about the ambivalence inherent in being a father, it is possible to imagine that the father might desire to mitigate his child’s feelings of resentment and persecution at the presence of the father (as well as his own complicated feelings of guilt at playing that role for his child) by strengthening his alliance with his child through gestures of closeness or friendship. This desire is reinforced by the child’s identification with the father. The boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforth, his relation to his father is ambivalent. (Freud, 1989, p.640)

Freud (1950) suggests that this relationship also functions to allow the father to identify in some way with his children: “Parents are said to stay young with their children, and that is indeed one of the most precious psychological gains that parents derive from their children” (p.20).

---

1 I should note here that, since I am using an almost entirely Freudian interpretation of this dynamic, it can be assumed that the word “child” should be read “son.”
But is this desire for closeness simply an attempt on the part of the father to negate or compensate for the hostility that he knows, either explicitly or implicitly, his presence will eventually evoke in his child, or to stay young, or is there also a positive character to it? From a strictly structural perspective, one could argue that this wish is precisely that – a veiled attempt to mitigate the frustration he is essentially powerless to avoid causing in his child. Indeed, how could a caring and concerned father not hope to allay the impending competition between himself and his child for the love of the mother?

Although this is a somewhat compelling, and perhaps to some extent illuminating, theory, recent research suggests that there are other factors at work that influence this urge to nurture this bond. For instance, Diamond (1986) points to psychobiological research that posits, “a trait termed ‘genuine fatherliness’ that is felt to be an instinctually rooted character-trend enabling the father to act toward his children with immediate empathic responsiveness” (p.43). According to this research, “fathers were found to achieve a ‘biorhythmic synchrony’ with their infants, a kind of empathic nurturing” (p.44).

What is more, we should not forget the notion of ‘engrossment’ mentioned in the literature review, that experience of “absorption, preoccupation, and interest” that fathers often feel toward their children after birth. Reed points to the relationship between the effect of this experience for the child and for the father. He says, “This process has been given a variety of labels: bonding or attachment, if one is focused on the child; engrossment, if one is thinking about the father” (2005, p.18). And he goes on to note
that the effects of engrossment are not limited to the father-child relationship.

Engrossment plays a large role in altering the father’s sense of identity:

Engrossment is more than a man’s observations and feelings about his baby; it also brings a new self-identity [...] The father looks on his baby, and watches other people as they meet the infant, and feels different about himself, as if to say, “I have a child, therefore I am a father.” With the new role come all the attendant rights and responsibilities. They are fathers! (p.203)

Rather than trying to make a case that one or another of these theories is or is not operative in the father’s desire for closeness with his child, I will simply point to the ways in which my participants described their feelings about their relationships with their children. All of the fathers I spoke with clearly took great pleasure in expressing to me the depth of their love for their children. It would not only be unfair to their testaments to try to reduce these affirmations to unconscious attempts to assuage their own guilt, it would be missing precisely that positive character that I spoke of earlier. For instance, when Ethan reported that he takes every chance he can to cuddle his daughter I do not feel compelled to read anything into that beyond the fact that he loves her and wants to feel that closeness with her that she could not allow as an infant. And John’s sadness that, although he is fairly close to his son now, he felt that he failed to achieve the sort of deep and abiding camaraderie he had so hoped for with his son spoke to me more of a wish for simpatico or compatibility than for absolution.

Again here is a task for understanding how this desire for real closeness describes a complexity of the father’s burgeoning identity. Just as ambivalence seems to be an inherent aspect of the father’s identity qua Father, the wish to be close to his children speaks of a multifaceted dynamic of the process of his identification with fatherhood. On one hand, the man is struggling to shed the mantle of Son (a mantle marked by
limitations – limitations imposed by the father – and by ambivalent feelings toward his own father) and at the same time he is learning how to comprehend and fulfill his new function as Father (in which he is to be responsible for eliciting these same feelings from his own children). As Gabarino (2000) writes, “Stories of [men’s] lives are full of their efforts to make sense of fatherhood – being the son of a father, or being a father” (p.13). On the other hand, this new father is (understandably) loath to forego his friendship with this fascinating and (mostly) enjoyable little being into whom so much of his own time and energy is being invested. In terms of the role of this wish in the transformation of the identity Man into the identity Father, we can see a fairly obvious conflict between two seemingly mutually exclusive sets of responsibilities and roles. How can the father manage his role as “boundary marker” and provide for his child the requisite “No” (or be the Lacanian “Name-of-the-Father”)\(^2\) while simultaneously being his child’s cohort, friend, and peer?

This problem is inextricably linked to the challenge I discussed in the previous section with regard to the father’s dual purposes of broadening and shrinking his children’s horizons. In this instance the difficulty for fathers, as I see it, is in finding a way to fulfill this unquestionably important and conflicted role without alienating their children in the process. Simply put, I, the father cannot help but use what precious little wisdom I may have gleaned from my own experience of being in the world in order to protect my children from making the same mistakes I myself have made. At the same time, I am faced with the possibility of going too far in my attempts to shepherd my children along their paths, positively asking for resentment and alienation.

\(^2\) Fink (1995) mentions the interesting relationship between these two concepts as they appear in Lacan’s original French. He points out that, in French, these two functions of the father are homophones – Le Non du Père and Le Nom du Père.
How can a father avoid this pitfall that so many men seem to fall into? I discovered early on that it is important to remember that we adults are not entirely unfamiliar with the experience of being children (although there is always the danger that we mistake our own experiences for those of our children). Probably the single most important aspect of my own youth, the definitive quality of my development from a child toward adulthood, was a sense of wonder. I wondered about the meanings of words I overheard adults using. I wondered about the purpose of the many things that represented for me the apparatus of *grown-upness*. And most importantly, I wondered about what it meant that there I was, wondering about all of these things. As I have grown more and more into adulthood I have, at times, realized that I do not wonder quite so often about simple things as I once did. To be sure, I “know” quite a bit more now about the specific uses of words and things than I did as a child. But this knowledge has, I sometimes realize, obscured the fact that I still have not come to any clear understanding of what it means that here I am (still). And of course I must not neglect to mention that wondering can, and often does, lead to the consideration of my own finitude – it is not going to last…

But before I go too far into my own musings, let me return to the problem at hand. What is the father to do about this dilemma of serving at one and the same time the purposes of saying “no” and of encouraging exploration? Probably the most poignant example of this in my own experience has to do with the question (surprise!) of death. My girls are curious about what it means that living creatures die. That comes as no surprise to me since I am curious about that myself. I remember one conversation in particular that I had with Rose and Ella. They had been talking with each other about the
death of a recently arrived and subsequently departed family dog. This dog was ill when we got her and it was a short time before she needed to be helped into whatever lies beyond this world. My girls came to me and asked what happens when people die. The instant I began to respond it occurred to me that there was no possible way I could tell them an answer without doing them an injustice. This may not be true for other parents, but for myself, I do not know the answer so how could I give them one? Still, an answer – some understanding – was what they demanded. It was at that point that it really hit me how similar we all are – parents and children – we simply do not know everything.

I realized that this question, “What happens to us when we die?” was an opportunity to be my children’s friend rather than THE AUTHORITY ON THIS ISSUE. I asked them a question that was once asked of me – “Where were you before you were born?” Ella’s answer: “Mommy’s belly.” (Good answer!). My next question: “How about before you were in mommy’s belly?” Rose’s answer: “I don’t know.” My response: “Good! Me neither! And where do we go when we die?” Ella this time: “I don’t know.” My response: “I don’t know either. But what do you think about that? When I asked you where you came from you said ‘I don’t know,’ and when I asked you where you will go when you die you said ‘I don’t know?’” Rose’s answer: “It’s the same! Both times it’s I Don’t Know!” Me: “Right! Wow!” and we all laugh together.

I use this example because ultimately, I was unable to tell them anything concrete in response to their very real concerns. But somehow that did not seem to be what they were looking for. In fact, I doubt that any answer I could give them would satisfy them (I know I would be suspicious of anyone telling me they know). Of course, this does not address the question of faith, and it is not meant to. Rather I intended to illustrate an
instance of giving up my position of supposed omnipotence in favor of being close to my children. There is a possibility that, in recognizing that becoming an adult (and especially, for the purposes of this discussion, becoming a father) does not spell the end of wonder, a father can use this understanding of the similarity between his own situation and his children’s to better comprehend how he can learn to share in the process of discovery with his children while, at the same time, helping them to see that there are times when a father’s experience truly can help in their own investigations.

**Fathers and Mothers**

If we are to accept that at least one of the father’s functions is to serve as boundary for his children then we must also recognize that he fulfills this role in relation to the child’s mother. What then are the differences between the father and the mother, in terms of their roles and responsibilities toward their children, and how do these differences influence the father’s struggle for identity?

One direction we could take is, of course, the psychoanalytic approach to this relationship. In this instance, the father comes to the scene as an interloper of sorts, a kind of wedge to be inserted between the mother and child (a relatively reductive view of the father, some might argue). As Fink (1995) points out, “If we hypothesize an initial child-mother unity (as a logical, i.e., structural, moment, if not a temporal one), the father, in a Western nuclear family, typically acts in such a way as to disrupt that unity, intervening therein as a third term – often perceived as foreign and even undesirable” (p.55). Again, this perspective on the father, whether valid or not in its own right, reduces the man to a symbol and strips him of the complex interplay of conflicting roles
and desires that characterizes his new role. Still, this narrow view of the father, in which he is more a shadow than a real person, appears to be a part of our cultural heritage. Take for instance Jung’s statement, “one knows what comes out of the mother, but what is the use of the father?” (1954, p.25). Ulanov (1977) also supports the argument that, because of the father’s lack of centrality in the child’s existence (especially compared to the mother), he is often seen as ephemeral, insubstantial, or ethereal. “In contrast to the tangible material birth process associated to the maternal, the engendering activity of the father is characterized as intangible and invisible, rather more a spirit than a human person” (p.49).

With the relatively recent proliferation of critical studies of gender and gender politics, there has been a concurrent (if much less pronounced) movement toward recognizing and acknowledging the role of the father in the family. At first glance, the reader might feel that this is nothing new. In fact, it is not. One needs only to look to someone like Rousseau⁴ to realize that the role of the father has been a concern for centuries. The significance of the father’s role being taken up by proponents of a revised gender politic is that, in this context, the father’s role is viewed critically, along with the supposed differences between his role and the mother’s and the ways in which these roles have been constructed by and sedimented into social practices and discourses. As Beall (1993) suggests, “gender is a socially constructed category that influences our perceptions of women and men” (p.127). La Rossa (1997) takes this argument as his basis when he says, “if fatherhood and motherhood exhibit so much similarity, why then is so much attention given to their differences? The answer comes down to gender

⁴ For instance, Rousseau tells us that, “as the true nurse is the mother, the true preceptor is the father” (1764/1979, p.48).
politics. Fatherhood and motherhood are intimately tied to societal concepts of masculinity and femininity [...] which in turn are products of people’s collective imaginations” (p.15).

So once again we are forced to ask, who is the father? But now our question comes out of the recognition that his role and the mother’s are not as clear-cut as was once believed (at least insofar as we follow the line of Beall’s thinking). Of course, Beall is not the only person to make an argument for the similarity of men’s and women’s roles as parents. Dowd (2000) argues that, “in general, fathering and mothering are not that different” (p.40). To help us understand how it came to be that father’s and mother’s roles have been divided along gender lines, Dowd suggests that, “what was missing [in cultural representations of fathers] were images of men with babies […] Over many centuries, the maternal bond has been visually represented, [but] only paternal power has been displayed” (2000, p.34). And Lamb points out that, “because the core features of mothering (nurturance and protection) are more universally recognized, much greater consensus exists about ‘good mothers’ than about ‘good fathers’” (in Peters, 2000, p.37).

Even if it is the case that, to a large extent, the differences between masculinity and femininity are, as La Rossa claims, “products of people’s collective imaginations,” this does not necessarily resolve the problem of difference between the father’s role and the mother’s as it is experienced by fathers and as it applies to the father’s task of establishing his new identity as a father. Many fathers do not perceive their role as being identical to mothers’. Diamond points out that, “unlike expectant motherhood, expectant fatherhood cannot be described in terms of its biological immediacy with its more continuous, visceral knowing” (in Friedman & Lerner, 1986, p.43). This difficult and
complex issue – of understanding how the father’s role differs from the mother’s in light of the argument against gender-typing – can be better conceived as a dynamic interplay between the mother and father in which each provides what he or she is able in any specific situation, regardless of what is generally accepted as one or the other’s gender-specific responsibility. As Diamond puts it, “fatherliness is humanized by a new emphasis on participation, but if it is seen as identical with motherliness instead of complimentary to it, there is a distortion of the authentic paternal role” (in Friedman & Lerner, 1986, p.43).

That the father’s role is largely a compliment to the mother’s presence does not negate the psychoanalytic perspective on the father’s role as boundary, but does make room for a positive interpretation of the father as a caregiver who is able to serve an essential function both in childbirth and in parenting in general. Statements from the father’s I spoke with suggest as much. This sentiment can be heard, for example, in Pablo’s statement that,

I want to be going through what you’re going through. I want to share every moment of what you’re feeling because I know that this baby is as much mine as it is yours and I wish that we could share the pain. And I think that that was a big motivator for me to try to be involved, to know that she was doing this big part of the job for our baby. And so that just by inertia I had to do a part of the job that was equally painful, just not in the same way.

Ethan’s account suggested the difficulty of finding one’s self in the periphery that is sometimes characteristic of the father’s part: “It’s hard to consider those things when this is happening within the mother, and part of it’s her, you know? It’s her body and it’s happening there.” But at the same time, as Chad attests, the father’s experience is no less intense for the fact that it is not he who is actually carrying and delivering the child: “I
was there with her the whole time, and sweating and crying and doing all the things she was doing. I mean, definitely not on the same scale, but I’m going through the emotions, too.”

What we find as we examine the role of the father as it relates to that of the mother is a complex and sometimes contradictory situation in which, on one hand, the father often finds himself on the fringes, and on the other, experiences similarly intense feelings of love and nurturance that are often attributed to “motherliness.” Once again a situation emerges where the new father must define himself against the obstacle of a confused and ambiguous role. And this task is made all the more challenging due, as we have seen, to a long-standing tradition of social representations of these feelings as being synonymous with femininity.

These men who confront the traditional societal expectations that they will be emotionally aloof in their relationship with their children while simultaneously feeling drawn to love and nurture their children are faced with a real challenge. In a way, the message that the desire to nurture is the domain of the mother roundly denies a major aspect of the father’s experience. Not only must he find his own way to give his child the love and comfort that (especially in the early years of his child’s life) the child’s mother is so well equipped to provide (consider the role of breastfeeding in establishing and strengthening the mother-infant bond), he must do so with the knowledge that society-at-large believes that he is incapable of doing so.

---

4 This is especially the case, as one can see in my participants’ accounts, from pregnancy through his child’s infancy, a time in which the child’s needs center to a great extent upon the mother’s breast. In cases where the child is bottle-fed this appears to be less of an issue, although many fathers report feeling that the mother is still the parent to whom the child turns most when desiring comfort.
This is a challenge that each father must find the solution to for himself since he must necessarily do so from within his own situation. Of course, there are fathers who do not live with their children and have a different set of obstacles to overcome and there are single fathers who need to figure out not only how to comfort and nurture their children but also to provide for them materially. But for fathers who are parenting along with the mother, the father’s ability to be for his children a source of nurturance is directly impacted by his relationship with his partner and the extent to which she encourages his involvement with the day to day care of their children. To be honest, I do not know too many men who do not want to be a central figure in the care of their children. As I have mentioned numerous times throughout this dissertation, virtually every father I have ever spoken with about this project has expressed great enthusiasm about being a father and about caring for his children.

If I Could, You Know I Would

Another fascinating theme that emerged in the course of my conversations (and relates to the previous discussion concerning the challenge fathers face in trying to be nurturers) was the desire that many of my participants expressed to be able to bear and breastfeed their children. Although this is not a wish that I have often heard in the company of other men, there is actually quite a lot written that acknowledges the prevalence of this feeling in men, particularly in new and expectant fathers. For instance, quite a few of the authors who focus on fatherhood issues mention men’s wishes for or experiences of androgyny (See, for instance, Diamond, 1986; Phillips & Anzalone, 1982; Dowd, 2000; Gabarino, 2000).
Freud (1989), in the case of little Hans, remarks on the little boy’s wish to reproduce and comments on his fantasies of being pregnant. And Horney (1967) describes what she terms “womb envy,” a response to Freud’s “penis envy,” that is intended to account for man’s attempt to achieve status and power by locating its root in the unconscious desire to be pregnant, to give birth, and to breastfeed a baby. This impossible wish is thwarted as fathers find themselves side by side with these experiences, while being unable to experience the immediate and direct physiological transformation they witness in the mother. But they are, nonetheless, transformed emotionally and psychologically. Diamond comments that, “the father must experience the impelling psychophysiological events of gestation, quickening, fetal growth, parturition and lactation in a second-hand, yet typically highly affective manner” (in Friedman & Lerner, 1986, p.43).

From my own conversations as well as from contemporary fatherhood literature it seems to me that this wish is quite common. Take for instance Pablo’s comment that, “I want to be going through what you’re going through. I want to share every moment of what you’re feeling because I know that this baby is as much mine as it is your and I wish that we could share the pain […] I wish I had boobies because right now it’s real hard for me to… she’s like… I can only settle Jaime down to some degree but then after that I’m hopeless.” From this statement it is clear that Pablo desires to be more for his child and wife but also that he wishes to feel the experience the way Marie feels it. Even John, who witnessed his child’s birth in an era during which fathers were by and large absent from the experience, said, “I almost had a true wish that I could have breastfed him […] I would have if I could.”
The implications of the new father’s impossible wish, in terms of his process of identification with his role, are complex. Like we have seen in several of the other themes I have already discussed, relative to this wish to be “motherly,” fathers find themselves in a situation in which their desire causes complications. I would speculate that, because fathers’ wish to achieve the immediate connection to their children that the mother is able to is doomed to failure,\(^5\) this could cast a shadow on the father’s sense of his own efficacy. And there is a contradiction inherent in the wish – if a man is to understand what it means that he is a father, how can he reconcile his wish to be what is undeniably maternal? In other words, where in this dilemma, is there a place for the father? It is as Diamond says: “The parental ambitions of the boy and man, their urges to create life, have generally been linked to maternal, womanly ambitions and prerogatives […] It is almost, one senses, as if to be a parent one must be a woman” (in Friedman & Lerner, 1986, p.42).

In this situation the father finds himself once again occupying a sort of negative-space. Just as we saw in the discussion of the father as a boundary marker, in terms of his inability to be truly androgynous he finds himself in a strange situation in which he practically does not exist insofar as his impulse to provide for his child what he literally cannot must be consigned to the realm of fantasy.

Our family shared a family bed when our daughters were babies. When Rosalea was only a few months old I remember waking up in the middle of the night to discover that she had somehow gotten behind me and had latched onto my elbow and was nursing on it while she slept. Although I found this supremely amusing, I was also quite moved.

---

\(^5\) I am only speaking here of the concrete biological immediacy of the mother/child relationship here, not its psychological or affective dimensions.
by the wonder at how peaceful she seemed, contentedly suckling my arm. It also made me a little jealous because I knew that Shannon got to experience the satisfaction of making our little baby feel that sense of calm pretty much all the time, a feat I could not hope to duplicate.

I realized from that and other similar experiences that, in order not to feel like I was not a useful presence in the family, I had to do no less than overcome the maternal/paternal dichotomy in such a way that I retained some concrete positive character but still felt the satisfaction of giving my child some kind of intimate and immediate care consistent with the care her mother provided through breastfeeding. I needed not only to recognize the certain failure of any wish I had to be the mother but I needed also to create, within the context of our family, a form of fathering that allowed me to cultivate my bond with my child. For instance, over the course of five or six years I must have spent a thousand hours holding my little daughters while I sang them to sleep and walked them around and around. For me it was something that only my girls and I shared and that made me feel like an essential part of the parenting process.

How each father does this is, of course, dependent on his own relationships and the vicissitudes of his situation. That being said, it is important to suggest the possibility that the solution to this quandary may not be all that complicated. To be sure, parenting in all its aspects, invites a lot of reflection and thought from mothers and fathers. Still, one could (and perhaps should) argue against over-analysis of this issue. It is my experience that many of my own responses to situations as a parent come intuitively and are only formally articulated after the fact. In other words, although fathers who wish to be able to bear and breastfeed their children do need to find some way to reconcile their
wish with the reality of their situation, it is possible to allow what a Zen Buddhist might call their “native wisdom,” their intuitive understanding of right action, to guide them as they establish their presence in their children’s world.

**Let’s Stay Together**

Moving beyond the question of differentiation between the roles of fathers and mothers, we can now look to another issue that arises out of the presence of both parents in the lives of their children. Seeing as how the father and mother so often work as allies in the task of parenting, the issue of collaboration between the two becomes an important topic for this discussion of the father’s identity. Arguably, this theme is not all that different in some ways from previous ones. That being said, however, I will point out that, while the above discussions dealt specifically with the ambiguity inherent in the father’s role in relation to the mother’s, this theme is focused more specifically on the effects on the family (and the father, more directly) of the interpersonal dynamics between the parents.

In a characteristically poetic and dramatic style, Jung (1954) describes the process of the mother/father dyad creating a child as,

"a genuine and incontestable experience of the divine, whose transcendent force obliterates and consumes everything individual; a real communion with life and the impersonal power of fate. The individual will for self-possession in broken: the woman becomes the mother, the man the father, and thus both are robbed of their freedom and made instruments of the life urge (p.192)."

While there is plenty of literature concerned with how this transformation affects women, there are only a relative handful of sources that deal with how this plays a part in men’s
lives⁶. Still, there are some theorists who have dealt with this issue and who link the relationship between fathers and mothers with the man’s experience of becoming a father. For example, Gabarino (2000) writes that, “the subjective experience of fatherhood is tied to the power that lies in the emotional intensity and psychological ramifications of making love with a child’s mother” (p.15).

But parents’ relationships are not only about making love. One (and perhaps the most obvious) implication of lovemaking is that a child may be born of it. When this happens, both parents’ lives are changed individually, but their relationship is also forever altered. Diamond (1986) points out that, “first-time expectant parenthood […] involves dealing with the transformation of a dyadic group into a triadic group as the entrance of a third person causes considerable realignment and, with it, many risks” (p.53). Looking at the statistics concerning high divorce rates and large numbers of out-of-the-home fathers in the United States demonstrates that there are indeed risks inherent in the transformation of the relationship between a man and a woman. However, the risks involved in this venture are not limited to the disintegration of the family. Even in cases in which fathers and mothers remain together, their collaboration and alliance are important factors in how the father perceives himself and his relationship with his children. Diamond states that, “[fathers who are] more empathic with and invested in their wives [tend] to be more cognizant of their own feelings and the impending arrival of their first child” (1986, p.55). And Dowd (2000) notes that, “there is a strong correlation between male nurturing and the strength and health of men’s relationships with the women with whom they share children” (p.21).

⁶ Although this is the case historically, there is, as I pointed out in my review of fatherhood literature, an increasing body of knowledge about this, as well as other fatherhood issues.
All of the literature I found on this topic seemed to agree that the coherence of the parents is extremely valuable, if not exactly essential, for the psychological well being of every member of the family, as well as of the family as a unit. As Dowd tells us, “gender matters little in nurture. The more critical factors are parental warmth, nurturance, and closeness. Individual characteristics are less important than relational ones; the quantity of time is less important than how that time is spent […] It is the family context that is critical and not the father-child relationship in isolation” (2000, pp.45-6). This is, of course, not an especially new belief. In *Emile*, Rousseau warns parents that their children depend on the health of the parents’ relationship: “As soon as there is no more intimacy between the parents, as soon as the society of the family no longer constitutes the sweetness of life, it is of course necessary to turn to bad morals to find a substitute” (1764/1979, p.49).

Although I do not subscribe to the notion that, in the absence of an intact nuclear family, children will automatically and as a matter of course turn to “bad morals,” every father I spoke with seemed to agree that cooperation, collaboration, and connection with the mother was important for their own sense of self as fathers. For instance, telling me about his experience of having gone through the birth of his daughter with his partner, Chad said, “it changes our relationship, I guess, because we have something more in common with each other than the peripheral things […] and it makes the relationship stronger, not just personally, but subliminally.” For Chad, his experience of being a father, and of being an integral member of a family, was intimately tied to the closeness, respect, and support he felt from Allison. In a similar vein, although in more general terms, Ethan described his feelings about the importance of the father-mother
relationship: “I feel like the world works like you have fathers, you have mothers, and you have children, and everything kind of flows around that. And being a good father is about the most important thing you can do, other than being a good husband. I mean, you have to be a good husband to be a good father.” Likewise, Charlie told me that he felt that, given what he perceived to be contemporary society’s nonchalance about divorce, keeping the family together is of vital importance: “The family being an important unit rather than something that’s just throw away. Because half the people anymore today seem to take it as a, ‘well, we can try.’ You know, and you’ve got all these kids from broken up families and stuff like that.” Pablo sees his relationship with Marie as essential to his own development as a human being. He describes their relationship as a place in which each partner provides the means for the other’s self-discovery: “Marie, to me, represents a lot of the aspects of myself that I haven’t explored and vice-versa, you know. I think we teach things to each other all the time. And we sort of remind each other of who we are and who we want to be and who we are not and… The most important thing about that to me is that whatever image we create for a child, as parents, it’s also that we connect it to the image that we have as a couple.” And John, although he did not feel that his own relationship with his wife had been successful in this way, described his son and daughter-in-law’s relationship with great joy and praise for their closeness and its positive influence on his granddaughter’s life: “This is one of the strongest marriages I’ve ever seen. They rejoice in one another. And I think they’ll go to their deathbed with that feeling toward one another. And as far as role-models, his daughter has seen this in them and he hopes that when it comes time for her to get married that she’ll see how love plays such a strong role.”
Relating this theme to the concept of identity, it is clear both from the literature and from my participants’ narratives that the father’s sense of self is enhanced by a strong relationship with the child’s mother. This relationship does not just provide the means for the father to explore his new role by sharing the tasks of nurturing and protecting the child; it also puts him in relation to another within the context of a shared experience (of childbirth and parenting) that is characterized by an immediacy that does not appear in many other situations. The kinship that develops out of the shared experience of parenting provides each participant with a mirror and sounding board by which to gauge his or her own part in the family drama and sheds light on aspects of self that might otherwise remain hidden or untried. In this sense, we can see that a man’s process of identification with the role of father is aided by his closeness and partnership with the mother.

After our first daughter, Rosalea, was born I quickly discovered that being the father often entails a sense inefficacy. Just as Pablo told me that many times Marie is the only person who can soothe their baby Jaime, Shannon was the parent who could satisfy Rose’s needs. Since I could not breastfeed (and that was pretty much all Rose wanted to do) I had to find some other way to involve myself in the lives of my family. Especially during those early months, when Rose seemed to be nursing constantly, I found myself attuning to Shannon’s needs because she was so busy helping Rose with hers that she had precious little time and energy to tend to herself. I made Shannon tea, rubbed her neck and shoulders, read to her, or just sat with them. I feel that although I was not central to Rosalea’s care for much of that time my steady presence strengthened my relationships with both Shannon and Rose. As Shannon has told me, her experience of my
involvement and interest in her relationship with Rosalea not only made her feel closer to me as a partner, but also showed her that I was, in fact, capable of providing the kind of care and nurturance she wanted for our children.

**Is This Really Happening? (Revisited)**

One of the more interesting comments that I kept hearing in my conversations was that the experience of pregnancy and birth did not seem real to my participants. What I found to be most interesting about this phenomenon is that this sense of unreality was intimately linked to the absence of a physical transformation in the father as he observes all of the changes taking place in his partner. It is interesting because, on the intellectual level, all of these men knew perfectly well what was happening and that it was indeed *really happening*. At the same time, without the felt sensations of gestation, quickening, and delivery, the experience lacked a certain solidity or density. Take for instance Charlie’s comment that “it wasn’t really real to me. Just through her whole pregnancy it was like she was pregnant but she was excited about it, and I was… I wasn’t not excited about it, but I wasn’t emotionally attached.” Or Chad telling me,

> it didn’t feel real, you know? I guess I didn’t really think it was going to happen. I know it’s there but… Like, until you hear the first heart beat you don’t really believe it. You see this ultrasound and see the actual baby moving around and feel it. As soon as she was born I got… I don’t know how to describe it. Just more… You know, you realize that all this is real.

Is this merely the result of not having the requisite biology to carry and birth babies, or is there more to it? I would like to suggest that this experience is possibly a symptom of the current way in which childbirth is taken up in our society. More precisely, I contend that the sense of unreality that many fathers feel during pregnancy
and birth is traceable to the marked absence of ritual in the lives of new fathers. In Birth as an American Rite of Passage, Davis-Floyd (1992) examines American birth practices through the lens of cultural anthropology. One of the key issues in her research was the transformation of birth rituals in the United States. Although Davis-Floyd concentrates mostly on birth as it pertains to mothers, her approach can help to shed light on the father’s dilemma as well. She defines ritual as “a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of a cultural belief or value; its primary purpose is transformation” (1992, p.8).

In my review of fatherhood literature I noted that, from the time of the Industrial Revolution, fathers’ place in birth has undergone many changes, ultimately leading to our current situation in which almost all fathers in the United States attend their children’s births and play an active role in labor and delivery. I also made note that the shift toward such a high percentage of fathers at births came without a concurrent shift in collected and shared wisdom about the father’s place at birth. It is as if the father has been thrust into a foreign land without a guide and without a translator. Good luck! Bon Voyage!

What is missing from these men’s experience that contributes to their sense of unreality? To answer this question we need to briefly look beyond our own horizon to practices of other cultural groups. In particular, we need to consider what anthropologists describe as couvade. The term couvade refers to a practice observed by anthropologists in which, “in primitive societies, at the approximate time of their wives’ lying-in, men take to bed in a pretense-ritual, simulating the agony of labor and birth” (Bittman &

---

7 Although it is not a focus in this discussion, I should note that many writers concerned with the birth community are extremely critical of the arrogance exhibited in anthropological accounts of different culture-bound birth practices (See, for instance, Mitford, 1992; Armstrong & Feldman, 1990; and Davis-Floyd, 1996). In this case I would like to point out the questionable use of the term “pretense-ritual” which suggests, to me at least, the author’s unwillingness to allow that the participants are actually sincere about their enactment of the couvade.
Zalk, 1978, p.10). Phillips & Anzalone (1982) tell us that “the anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor named this ritual couvade in 1865 by taking the term from the French verb couver, to brood or hatch” (p.2). It makes sense to wonder why these men would perform this ritual. One could imagine that, in terms of our current discussion, the existence of such a ritual elsewhere and the obvious lack of any equivalent in this society might, at least to some extent, suggest a rationale for the unreal sensation so many American men appear to experience.

One of the possible implications for the American father is that, pursuant to the absence of an appropriate birth ritual (e.g. couvade), there is instead a sort of vacuum of meaning within which the father must invent for himself the means by which to synthesize his experience of pregnancy and birth. In this sense then it is possible to see that one challenge facing men as they learn to identify with the father role is to establish for themselves a sense of their place in the context of birth and in the flesh of their relation to their children and partners without recourse to an established matrix of meaning that they can enter into through ritual.

It is easy to surmise from mid-twentieth century birth manuals, television shows, and even cartoons, that the prevalent father-ritual during the birth consisted of pacing back and forth in the hospital waiting room, chain smoking cigarettes, finally to be rewarded with a glimpse of his new child as a nurse puts it into the glass-enclosed nursery. Additionally, fathers as husbands to their pregnant wives were portrayed as overworked, “out of the loop,” and confused. What was missing then and is still missing today is a sense of how the man’s society helps him prepare for impending fatherhood.
Unlike fathers, mothers have certain ritualized practices that are intended to help them make the transition into motherhood materially as well as psychologically and emotionally. For instance, the women in Shannon’s life threw her a baby shower. She received gifts that were intended to help make parenting a little easier – baby shampoo, baby clothes, and so on. But this party also gave the older women in Shannon’s life – women who were already mothers – a chance to offer her what wisdom they could from their own experiences and words of encouragement and support. I, on the other hand, had nothing at all like that to give me a sense that the men around me who had already made the leap into fatherhood cared one way or the other. I do not mean to say that no one cared that I was going to be a father. What was significant was that there was simply no established ritual in place that provided the setting for this kind of father-to-father palaver equivalent to Shannon’s baby shower.

Even had there been a father’s baby shower, I wonder what the men there would have told me, considering that every man to whom I might have appealed for a sense of what to expect or how to prepare came from precisely that culture that prescribed a pack of smokes and a pair of walking shoes as a way of easing into fatherhood. I cannot help but feel that my lack of preparation and the subsequent surrealism of my transformation from man to father was due largely to the absence of a suitable ritual to mark that transition with meaning and significance.

**Is There Anybody Out There?**

“How are fathers to understand all the many emotional and psychological changes they may encounter if they have no one to talk with, share with, and learn from about all the many changes that parenthood entails?” (Linton, 2000)

Following from the discussion of fathers’ relationship with mothers, another aspect of fathers’ struggle for identity emerges in relation to a broader social field. A
prevalent theme for my participants involves the issue that they feel that there is no one with whom they could talk about their experience of being fathers. This issue forces us to consider two questions: First, why is it (if it is at all) important that fathers have the opportunity to enter into dialogue with others about their experience? Second, what is the importance of the new father’s community’s participation in that dialogue?

The first consideration amounts to a question of language and discourse. Lacan (1966) tells us that “language is not to be confused with the various psychical and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject” (p.139). In other words, language itself, at least in Lacan’s estimation, is not some intrapsychic entity lurking within each speaking subject. Nor is it to be found in the physical apparatus and act of speech. In fact, “language, with its structures, exists prior to each subject’s entry into it” (p.139). From Lacan’s characterization of language we can understand that a person discovers him- or herself always already in the grip of a particular language with a relatively prescribed and circumscribed set of possible ways of speaking about her or his experience. But it is not simply that one’s language (that is, the language that he speaks and that others speak around and with him) determines the ways in which he thinks, feels, and articulates his experience. Rather, it is through understanding the nature of discourse that we can begin to see the importance of fathers having a means by which they can articulate their experiences.

Lacan (1966) remarks that “the subject, while he may appear to be the slave of language, is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth, if only in the form of his proper name” (p.40). One implication that can be drawn from this statement is that, having found himself immersed
in his society’s dominant discourse, the new father must discover how he can articulate his experience from within the bounds of that discourse. For instance, as I pointed out in my review of fatherhood literature, although much has been written about concerning the father’s role in terms of his effect on the other members of the family – such as the effects on children of the father’s absence, or how the father’s intrusion upon the intimacy of the mother-infant dyad brings about feelings of resentment toward the father – next to nothing has been written about the father’s experience of these events. In this case, the discourse surrounding the father provides no instance in which what he has to say about his own experience can be linked to a preexisting conversation about fathers’ experiences.

Of course that is not to say that if there is not already a discussion being had about an issue it simply cannot be talked about. What is at issue here is the fact that, without an existing forum for fathers and their experiences as such, each father must, for himself and for others, either define his experiences anew in order to articulate them faithfully or he must rely on other’s ability to grasp his meaning by appealing to their familiarity with similarly articulated experiences expressed in other contexts. Foucault calls these contexts within language that determine the meaning of what is said discursive formations. In Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, Dreyfus and Rabinow characterize Foucault’s notion of discursive formations as, “the regularities exhibited by [the relations of serious speech acts] with other speech acts of the same and other types” (1982, p.49). The term “serious speech act” refers to what Foucault calls the statement and is “neither an utterance nor a proposition, neither a psychological nor a
logical entity, neither an event nor an ideal form” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.45).

Rather, we are to understand the statement as something that is

Relative and oscillates according to the use that is made of the statement and the way in which it is handled [...] At a certain scale of macro-history, one may consider that an affirmation like “species evolve” forms the same statement in Darwin and in Simpson; at a finer level, and considering more limited fields of use (“neo-Darwinism” as opposed to the Darwinian system itself), we are presented with two different statements. The constancy of the statement, the preservation of its identity through the unique events of its enunciations, its duplications through the identity of the forms is constituted by the functioning of the field of use in which it is placed. (Foucault, quoted in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.45).

In other words, we have the statement, which, while having a kind of sense in and of itself, is constituted as having a particular meaning only in relation to other statements in its field of use. And these statements, when situated within the context of similar statements, make up discursive formations. It is precisely these discursive formations that make meaningful statements possible. Thus, without a social discourse concerned with the father, when a father speaks about his experience, provided he has someone to speak with, his statements run the risk of being interpreted through a lens that does not necessarily apply to the context from which his experience comes.

As to the second question (What is the importance of the father’s community’s involvement in this dialogue?) the answer is implied in the previous discussion. Without the cooperation and participation of the social field, the father’s experiences are apt to remain either unarticulated or to be understood as a derivative of some related but not entirely relevant system of meanings.

What remains then, in this discussion of the father’s need for a social discourse about him is the question of how the absence of one plays a part in his process of
identification. Without access to a shared set of meanings about his experience the new
father is forced to make sense of his experience without the luxury of being able to appeal
to an established body of knowledge about his situation. This situation could
understandably lead to several different feelings. For instance, given that plenty has been
said about the father as other and next to nothing about the father as subject, this marked
absence could lead a new father to feel that his society undervalues his role. Or, for
another example, he could feel that to be a father necessarily means to be misunderstood.
In any case, it seems clear that without the benefit of a common discourse – a father-
dialect if you will – the new father’s task of learning who he has become (is becoming) is
made all the more difficult.

One of the main issues that really and truly took me by surprise when I became a
father was the way my focus shifted from myself to my child. In my conversation with
Pablo we touched briefly on the sense that both of us have that our culture encourages us,
because we are men, to strive for personal excellence, achievement, success. We are
supposed to “look out for number one” so to speak. When news of my expectant
fatherhood got around the men in my life most often said things like “uh oh, just wait,”
implying that my sweet bachelor life was about to come to an end. One friend, upon
hearing the news, proceeded to sing the introduction to “Another One Bites the Dust.”
All of these reactions seemed geared toward telling me that I was making a mistake, but
offered nothing helpful to me in terms of understanding my situation. I should hasten to
add that I also heard a lot of congratulations and well wishing. It would be wrong to give
the impression that my experience of becoming a father was a negative one. Quite the
contrary, I hold that time dear in my memory.
What I did not hear however, and what I try to convey to other expectant fathers when I can, was how becoming a father diminished my sense of self-importance and replaced it with concern for my child and her well being. When I realized that this was happening – that I was becoming less self-absorbed for the sake of another – rather than feeling a sense of loss (for instance, that maybe my own personal success story would have to be put on hold) I felt as if I had been freed from the unreasonable expectation to achieve personal glory. This experience runs counter to the warnings and condolences I was hearing from my friends and I now realize that they were simply carrying on the conversation about men that they have heard all their lives. If it were not for becoming a father myself I might be singing the same song today.

There’s Somethin’ Happenin’ Here - What it is Ain’t Exactly Clear

It is an easy task to make the logical leap from a discussion concerning the absence of a fatherhood discourse to one concerning the fact that many men confess to not knowing what to expect as fathers. Indeed, how could a father know what to expect when no one will tell him what he or she knows of the situation? That men embarking on the journey of fatherhood do not know what is to come and have few resources on which to draw for insight calls into question their roles not just as fathers but as men. In a society in which gender politics is a lively topic of debate, it would serve us well to attend to the issue of masculinity and how it is commonly characterized in our social order.

In The Masculine Mystique, Kimbrell (1995) argues that modern men face a “hidden crisis” in which they are “locked into rigid stereotypes and financial
responsibilities but are also being jolted by economic dislocations and rising demands for a change in gender roles” (p.xii). He sees the effects of this manifested in “lives spent in meaningless work or joblessness, broken marriages, the inability to properly father their children, the lack of any real relationship to the natural world” (p.xii). This is an important theme to recognize precisely because masculinity has for so long in our society been characterized by such qualities as forward-thinking, decisive action, and the ability to anticipate and respond to situations (Kimbrell, 1995; Franklin, 1988). The representations of these and other images of masculinity are pervasive in our society. Mass media in particular has been instrumental in disseminating these symbols. In his critique of television, Mander (1978) tells us “we evolve into the images we carry in our minds. We become what we see” (p.239). So if men internalize an image of masculinity including, if not entirely characterized by, qualities suggestive of a semblance of omniscience and omnipotence, how is the new father to deal with the realization that he is, in fact, quite ignorant about what is to come and how he is to respond to it?

Clearly this is not a simple cut-and-dry scenario. It is unlikely that most men see themselves as all-knowing or all-powerful. There is still plenty of room for fallibility and ignorance. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, when it comes to becoming a father, many men find themselves in a situation (childbirth, for instance) in which, although they may be accustomed to taking charge, they are at a loss as to their roles and responsibilities. For the new father, trying to foster his developing sense of identity, this appears to be yet another obstacle in his path.

It seems clear that the father must allow himself to let go of his (likely deeply ingrained) sense that he needs to be in control of the situation and instead to listen to
what that situation is asking of him (Incidentally, this imperative pertains to pretty much every theme under consideration in this chapter). All of my participants admitted in their accounts of their own birth experiences that their responsibilities at the birth ultimately came down to finding a way to let their partners dictate the action and the pace of the birth. Likewise, throughout my process of becoming a father I have had to learn how to step back and listen to the needs of Shannon and our daughters in order to know what my role is. I do not think this is only a task for fathers, however. Shannon, so it seems to me, has always been quite good at taking her cues from a situation and letting her actions come as responses to what each moment dictates. My struggle has been to overcome my sense that the situation is supposed to respond to me rather than the other way around. And as I become more adept at listening and responding rather than taking hold and directing I find that not only does my ability to deal with situations improve but my experience of the part I play in them is more positive.

I Only Want What is Best For You

Even the casual reader must see by this point in our discussion that many of the themes I am presenting here are interrelated. It would be difficult to deny that there can be traced a logical progression from one to the next. For instance, the recognition that there is a lacuna in the social discourse when it comes to fathers helps to make sense of the fact that many new fathers find themselves without a compass when it comes to how to take up their new role. It should not be too surprising then to learn that many fathers report that among their chief fears about fathering is that they will not be able to give their children what they need.
As I noted in the previous chapter, my participants did not express this concern in terms of their ability to provide material goods. That is, no one I spoke with told me that they were worried about not being able to feed or clothe their children (although this is no doubt a common worry). Rather, these men confessed to concerns that their children will need from them some intangible endowment that they, the fathers, will be unable to provide. Pablo put it well when he said, “My fear comes from thinking that I’m doing great but one day I might find out that I was lacking on a certain front and my child is suffering from that.” Ethan’s difficulty lay in his feeling that in order to fulfill his role he must sometimes “be in two places at once.” And Charlie told me that chief among his fears was that he might discover that he does not love his child enough. John’s lament that he only wishes he had been smarter or more clever in his fathering offers some confirmation that this is, indeed, a valid concern.

Here again we find an instance in which the new father runs up against a real dilemma in terms of his own understanding of who a father is and how fathers are portrayed by his society. How is he to resolve the disparity between, on one hand, his feelings that he may not be up to the task of parenting, and on the other, the message he is receiving from the social world that a father and a man are supposed to be strong and sure and competent?

I think that the answer to these questions involves a subject that has come up many times already over the course of this discussion. We have seen time and time again that one of the main obstacles men have to overcome as they become fathers is the adherence to gender-typed attitudes and approaches to situations. One thing that I have discovered to be absolutely true about being a father is that there are going to be times
when I do not have the answers and there will be times when I look back on something I said or did and feel wretched that I did not say or do something else instead. That being said, just as Winnicott’s “good enough mother” does not have to be perfect in order to give her children what they need, a wise man is one who recognizes that he cannot possibly live up to the expectations that his society, his children, and he himself have for him. For me, what is important (I should say what has become important) is that I allow myself the latitude to try something as a parent and fail miserably. My own relatively short tenure as a father has already shown me that to expect perfection not only makes every moment one in which I am trying to do the impossible; it also makes it that much harder to try something new when my first attempt proves useless.

Welcome to the Machine

“The paradoxical role of medicine consists, above all, in neutralizing [doctor and patients], in maintaining the maximum difference between them, so that, in the void that appears between them, the ideal configuration of the disease becomes a concrete, free form” (Foucault, 1994, p.9).

The final theme in my analysis was, as I mentioned above, the single most pervasive one in all of my conversations. The theme of which I speak is that of the complex and often difficult dynamics between the medical establishment and the birthing family. As was evident from my participants’ stories, the relationship between families and the medical establishment is complex. Even as a father describes his feelings of uprootedness or disempowerment at the hands of an insensitive hospital staffer, he acknowledges the importance that the specialists were there to make sure nothing went wrong. This was evident in Ethan’s statement, “The pregnancy didn’t seem so much our own. It seemed like we were doing things on other people’s time and other people’s energy. You know, it didn’t seem like our experience any more in some ways because
we needed so much help from other people, the medical field, I guess – the medical establishment.”

In order to comprehend the relationship between medicine and childbirth, we must understand the history between the two. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (1994) traces the shift that occurred in medicine around the middle of the eighteenth century. It was around this time that medicine went from being one aspect of a larger philosophical project to being widely recognized as an objective science in its own right. Through the passage of medicine from essentially a lay-practice to a highly organized and specialized field of study we see a concurrent shift in the medical discourse both in terms of the aim of medicine as well as the relationship between the medical practitioner and the patient. The more clinical and objective medicine became, the less personal and more distant the relationship between the practitioner and the patient became. As Foucault points out, “paradoxically, in relation to that which he is suffering from, the patient is only an external fact; the medical reading must take him into account only to place him in parentheses” (1994, p.8).

Even from its inception this new medicine espoused a technological approach to its interventions with the human body. Not only did the practitioner’s gaze undergo a radical change from one that saw a human being to one that “must be structured as a look through a magnifying glass, which, when applied to different parts of an object, makes one notice other parts that one would not otherwise perceive” (Foucault, 1994, p.15); the production of medical technology began to increase as well. These instruments allowed a doctor to perform his\(^8\) task with greater ease and dexterity. This new medical technology,

\(^8\) It is important to note that, at this point in history, medicine was strictly a male profession. Therefore, it is no mistake or oversight on my part when I use the masculine pronoun here.
combined with the newly developed view of the body as a sort of partitioned or compartmentalized biomachine led to the specialization of the medical practitioner. This movement gave rise to the field of Obstetrics within medicine (Mitford, 1992).

Based largely on the objective gaze physicians were being trained to employ with their patients, a new movement began within the community of obstetricians to conceive of pregnancy as a medical condition. In 1913, Joseph De Lee published The Principles and Practice of Obstetrics. Dr. De Lee was a “proponent of the notion that all births, including those designated ‘low-risk,’ are inherently pathogenic and should be treated as such. [He says] ‘It always strikes physicians as well as laymen as bizarre […] to call labor an abnormal function, a disease, and yet it is a decidedly pathological process’” (Mitford, 1993, p.58). De Lee’s desire to incorporate obstetrics, and consequently labor and birth, into the larger field of general medicine was motivated by several interests. To illustrate this point one need only consider this passage from his text: “If we can invest obstetrics with the dignity of a great science, which it deserves, if we acknowledge the pathogenic nature of this function, improvement will follow in every field of practice, and that anachronism, the midwife, will spontaneously disappear” (De Lee, quoted in Mitford, p.58).

Although the picture I am painting of the medical establishment is decidedly grim, I must hasten to add that we must be careful not to lose sight of the beneficial contributions of medical science to labor and delivery. For instance, according to neonatal and infant mortality statistics provided by the Centers For Disease Control, 1999 saw an average of 17.9 deaths per 1,000 live births in the U.S. as compared to 76.2 deaths per 1,000 as recently as 1950 (CDC website). There is little doubt that advances in
medical technology account for much of this decrease. That being said, however, it is important to understand that the combination of the medically-trained gaze (and the concurrent view of the patient as an object composed of mechanical parts) and the tendency to view pregnancy as a pathological condition cannot but create a gulf between the medical staff and the birthing family.

That this is a danger is clearly the case in several of my participants’ accounts. Take Ethan’s story for instance: “The doctor, in a moment of complete rudeness, called over one of the medical students and started talking about the degree of it and what was happening in front of us as if we weren’t in the room.” Or Chad’s: “One of the first things the nurses said was that Allison was not going to be able to get through this without an epidural, like once she started the Pitocin. She said that right in front of Allison. She said, ‘Oh, you’re not going to be able to handle this.’” Or Charlie’s: “The nurses kept trying to push me out of the way and Ann kept saying, ‘stay here,’ and so I’d stay there and the nurses were having to work around me. They were getting irritated, I could tell, but, you know, screw them. It’s not about them.”

These examples of the invasiveness of the medical staff help to illuminate the function of the practitioner’s gaze and the configuration of the patient as a repository of symptoms that have come to characterize the discursive field of the medical establishment. I have already discussed how nurses’ and doctors’ ill-timed comments made the fathers feel. What remains is to consider the messages implicit in these discursive practices.

Take for instance the nurse telling Allison that she would not be able to handle her labor without an epidural. Obviously, on the surface, this is an instance of a
representative of the medical establishment disavowing her patient’s agency. At the same time, there is an implicit message that says, ultimately, “you have no power here; this is our domain.” And what about Ethan’s account of the doctor’s seeming obliviousness that discussing Ethan’s daughter’s medical issues with a medical student might upset the family? That the doctor would do this (and this sort of invasion of privacy is by no means an uncommon experience in a hospital) suggests an underlying view of patients and their families as nonentities. Rather than seeing people in a room, the medical professional (as I mentioned above) is trained to recognize in the patient simply the intersection of pathological and potentially pathological facts. In each of these cases, below the level of the hospital personnel’s clear conscious intention lies an implicit deployment of the medical machine’s agenda to establish and maintain itself as the absolute authority and possessor of power within the confines of the hospital.

It is a curious thing that, although these men all felt as if the medical staff were trying to “own” their births, the conflicts that arose seemed to me to actually give these fathers an opportunity to feel that they were serving an important role as their partner’s protector. In the previous themes I have discussed the issues they raise for the father’s process of identification tend to highlight the ambiguity and ambivalence in the father role. In this case, however, it seems to me that the father’s power struggle with the medical community actually offers him the opportunity to define himself in a concrete way, over against the forces that would take away from him and his partner an event that they are loath to concede.
Practical Implications and Suggestions for Interventions

The analyses in this chapter help to shed light on the father’s situation, his process of identification with his role, and the ways in which others’ attitudes and expectations impact this process. However, without giving some thought to the practical implications of these issues, this discussion is bound to remain strictly academic. What is needed here is to provide, based on the preceding discussion, some suggestions for praxis to give men some idea of where and how to begin making changes in how fatherhood is conceptualized and experienced.

One aspect of the father’s experience that pervaded this chapter is the conflict between the reality of the father’s role and the myth of masculinity. In other words, although men are required by their society and culture to embody certain “masculine” traits such as strength, knowledge, confidence, and the like, as fathers we often find ourselves needing to step back and allow ourselves the possibility of not knowing the answers in order to discover our part in the act of parenting. To this end, we must learn to set aside our own self-importance for the sake of our children and our partners. This entails cultivating a sense of wonder and a willingness to participate in the discovery of new ways of understanding the world. Letting go of our own self-interest also makes it possible to support the mother as she embarks on her own challenging process of becoming the primary source of nurturance for our children.

In order for fathers to begin to make this kind of change in our understanding of and approach to our situation we must first become aware that there are others who are sharing this dilemma. This is only possible when communication between fathers becomes more prevalent. Through the development of a father-discourse certain
experiences that are common to many fathers can be addressed. For instance, any father could benefit from realizing that he is not alone in experiencing fear at the prospect of becoming a parent. Fear that he will prove emotionally inadequate for the needs of his family, that he will not be a good provider for his family, or simply that he is alone in his concerns all threaten to hamper a father’s ability to let himself love and support his family with a clear conscience.

Another aspect of fatherhood that could stand to be brought into a shared father-discourse is the shock that so many fathers experience as they first find their focus shifting from themselves to their children. I know that, although no one could have prepared me for the intensity of this change in my perception, I would have benefited simply from hearing that this is really a fairly common experience for new fathers.

One more issue that this new discourse could help the new father understand is the fact that, at least in the early months of his baby’s life, the mother will, quite likely, be the focus of that child’s world. When I encountered this situation myself, it took some time before I realized that, far from being extraneous to the process of parenting, I could be extremely valuable to my family by giving Shannon the support she needed while she was dedicating her energy and attention to our daughter. Having the benefit of other men’s experience of this would have helped me to understand that this was something that was happening not just to me but also to other fathers. Just by normalizing some of these trying experiences fathers can help each other alleviate some unnecessary suffering and self-doubt.

As fathers begin to develop a vernacular for their shared experience of fathering we will be better equipped to acknowledge our fears and hopes and challenge the existing
attitudes toward masculinity that encourage us to keep these feelings to ourselves. Additionally, by re-conceptualizing what it means to be a man we can begin to allow ourselves to cultivate qualities that have traditionally been ascribed to the feminine, such as the ability and willingness to listen and respond rather than aggressively taking charge in a situation. Take for instance a situation that is common immediately following delivery. The mother, after having gone through the physically and emotionally demanding task of delivering a baby, is overcome with sadness and begins crying uncontrollably. Rather than responding to this by telling her that she is experiencing postpartum depression due to hormone changes (an explanation that does nothing to alleviate the experience itself) a man might instead listen to how his partner is experiencing this sudden change in her body and her relationship to her baby. When he realizes that she is not looking for a scientific understanding of her emotional experience he will be better able simply to support her as she experiences it.

The question that arises from these suggestions is, of course, how do men begin to make these changes in a society which is tacit about fatherhood for the most part and has a fairly sedimented view of masculinity? This is the point at which the development of new rituals for fathers comes into play. The problem, as I see it, is that there are simply no appropriate forms in our society upon which such a ritual could be modeled. Rather than the typical male-rituals we are familiar with in this society (for instance, the bachelor party), men need to establish something more along the lines of a bar mitzvah – that is, a ritual intended to symbolically mark a man’s transformation from a man to a father.
Although these are only preliminary suggestions for much needed changes in how the father is understood, they are, I hope, a good starting point for continued thought and discussion about these issues.

**Reflections on Writing about Fatherhood as A Father and as a Researcher**

When I began this project, I answered my own research questions (see Appendix D). Little did I know then, as I wrote my responses, just how closely my own experience of being a father would reflect my participants’ stories. Looking at my own answers I found numerous instances where my experience was in agreement with the things that were important to the men with whom I spoke. The themes that emerged in our conversations were, by and large, present in my own account. For instance, every father I spoke with made a point of emphasizing the importance of their relationship with their children’s mothers in their own processes of becoming fathers. Likewise, in my own responses I spent about half of them talking about my relationship with Shannon and how it is the bedrock of my experience of being a father as well as one of the primary measures of how I am doing as a father. I spoke of my “strong collaborative and communicative relationship with Shannon,” and how “I just hoped that Shannon came out of the birth feeling like she had had the experience she hoped to have and I hoped to help her achieve that any way I could.”

I also found that I was not the only man who felt as if I was alone in the process of trying to simultaneously forge and discover this new identity of Father. In my own responses to the research questions I commented, “I did not get too much advice or warnings,” and “I really started feeling like Shan and I were going it alone.” And just as
many of my participant’s described the feeling that there was no one to whom they could appeal in order to make sense of their transformation into fatherhood, and no viable cultural model to which they could aspire, my own account reflects this sentiment: “My own father never really struck my as a role model for what it means to be a father […] Most of what I have learned about being a father, I feel, I have learned by picking up bits here and there – from books, from comments I remember from men I respected – and have cobbled together to form some idea of what a good father is and does.” I also remarked that it is time to “open up this area of discourse that is currently missing from our society.”

All in all, I was struck by how similar our experiences were, my participants’ and mine. That being said, this similarity among all of the accounts (mine included) led me to wonder to what extent my own biases and beliefs about fatherhood influenced how my participants represented their own experiences. To be sure, the focus areas I had designated prior to my conversations with my participants served to circumscribe our discussions and lead them to certain topics rather than to others. Still, I cannot help but believe that this is a necessary aspect of conducting research. And who is to limit the focus of the conversation if not the researcher him- or herself? At the same time, my own biases showed themselves early enough when, toward the end of my conversation with Pablo, I was ready to wrap up when he pointed out that I had completely neglected the issue of fear in fatherhood. How this helps to disclose my own assumptions about fatherhood I cannot say except to comment that, since fears and concerns were listed as a topic of conversation in my focus areas (see Appendix C), it seems I must have, for
whatever reason, been motivated not to ask Pablo about his fears (perhaps because his story was so optimistic).

I think, in the final analysis, I have to conclude that there is no pure account of fatherhood that I could present in this dissertation. Each man’s story was written using transcripts from conversations that were guided by my own a priori assumptions, insofar as I designed the questions ahead of time. In this way, my own approach as a researcher colored the conversations. At the same time, however, my participants played an active role in determining the course of the conversations by choosing where to digress and where to emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects of their experiences. Ultimately, each conversation, the subsequent analyses and, finally, the discussion that came out of them were co-constituted by the interplay of my own biases, assumptions, and presuppositions on one hand, and those of my participants on the other. Rather than claim that what I have done in this dissertation is to present stories of fatherhood from several individuals, it may be more accurate to say that I have presented a particular fatherhood discourse as it came to be formed through the interaction of multiple instances of fatherhood experience that were invited to become conscious of themselves long enough to articulate themselves.

Summary and Review

This dissertation began as an investigation into the lived experience of becoming a father through witnessing the event of childbirth. My research was initially motivated by my own experience of becoming a father and being at my children’s births. My interest in this topic was reinforced during my work with fatherhood and childbirth
literature. It was clear to me from my research that fathers have not been adequately represented in discussions about childbirth or, frankly, even in the context of fatherhood research.

I solicited participants with whom I had recorded conversations about their experiences of becoming fathers in the context of witnessing their children’s births. But as I spoke with these men about their experiences I soon discovered that I could not limit my focus to the birth itself. In every case, the actual birth event was situated within a larger field of father-related experiences. Each father’s different background, the people in his own childhood who provided the models for what it means to be a man and a father, each man’s relationship with his child’s mother gave their stories of becoming a father added texture and richness.

From the transcripts of these conversations I was able, using a method adapted from Giorgi’s phenomenological method, to distinguish meaningful and psychologically significant themes that deepened my understanding of these men’s experiences. The themes that emerged from the conversations reflected not only each father’s individual perspective on fatherhood but also several points of intersection among their experiences. Although the themes that were unique to each father’s narrative helped to shed light on the psychological dynamics of his own story, the themes that were shared among my participants constituted the basis for my discussion. These themes included fathers’ relation to the social world, to their partners, and to their children. Also discussed were the father’s wish for some form of androgyny, his sense of derealization, and his ambivalence toward becoming a father. I concluded with a discussion of the complexity of the intersection of childbirth and the medical establishment. In each section of the
discussion I brought my own experience to bear on the issue at hand in order to deepen my own understanding of the issue as well as to draw from the sections the practical implications inherent in them.

My strategy for my discussion of these shared themes was to consider each of them according to a singular issue – identity. In this way I was able to connect these themes in order to bring into focus what seemed to me to be the key conflict in new fathers’ experience. The process of identification as a father, more than anything else, showed itself to be fraught with contradiction, ambivalence, and ambiguity. At the same time, disclosing fathers’ situations in this way opened up the possibility of better understanding what men face as they enter into the world of fatherhood and also provided some points at which the people who constitute these new fathers’ social field can intervene to make the transition a little smoother. What I found was that the onus of creating a shift in the ways fathers are understood lies on fathers themselves. I suggested possible means of instituting changes. For example by establishing father-oriented rituals that serve a function similar to the expectant mother’s baby shower men might provide for each other a milieu designated specifically for preparing expectant fathers for the changes they are about to encounter in their relationships with their partners, families, and friends. I also proposed that men should begin to learn to recognize how certain aspects of societal attitudes toward masculinity serve to inhibit men’s ability to approach their role as fathers with a sense of wonder and exploration and instead encourage men to feel compelled to establish their authority and knowledge in order to secure their dominance in the family.
Suggestions for Further Research & Limitation of the Study

Throughout the writing of this paper I continually found myself wishing that I could include more and more areas of discussion that pertained to my topic. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of my project, it was necessary to leave many of the peripheral foci out. Even so, I ended up talking about more different aspects of fatherhood, masculinity, and childbirth than I expected to when I began. Although I ultimately decided to focus on the issue of identity, any of the sub-plots and side conversations of my discussion could potentially be expanded into its own research project. My aim in this paper was to shed some light on a class of experiences that has been in the dark for a long, long time. Therefore, the possible avenues one might explore in regard to fatherhood are many.

That being said, I will point out what I see to be some limitations in my project. The first limitation I see has to do with my sample. Even though, as I have stated several times in this paper, my intention was to describe the concrete experiences of the several fathers with whom I spoke rather than to try to generalize their experiences to apply to all fathers, I feel that only speaking with five fathers simply cannot do justice to the myriad varieties of experience men are having all around us. In reality, this paper hardly represents the tiniest fraction of all fathers everywhere, and frankly, it would not surprise me if no other fathers who read this recognize in their own experience the themes I discuss here. Additionally, my sample was essentially monochromatic. I do not mean to deride my own work, but I do feel that this project could have yielded very different results had my sample included fathers from more diverse racial and socioeconomic
backgrounds. And although I was and am grateful for the participation and cooperation of all of my participants, I would have liked to be able to speak with more fathers.

Another limitation that I perceive in this project, and that I touched upon above, is its limited scope. I found myself constantly struggling to include what I felt I needed to say in order to make my points while at the same time trying to maintain my focus on fathers’ experience of birth. In the final analysis, I feel that my focus shifted to a broader perspective than I began with. I simply could not speak about some of the issues that emerged that impact fathers’ experiences. I feel that a more exhaustive study of fatherhood could make sense of the incredible complexity of the father’s experience in a way that I am not entirely confident I was able to achieve here.

Finally, I feel that in order to better understand the father’s experience, it is important to give it context. In my initial research design I had intended to include a social history of fatherhood and interpret my findings in light of that history. In order to actually complete this project however, I elected to eschew that section. While doing so did, in fact, make it much more possible for me to accomplish the difficult task of finishing, I cannot help but think that maybe, sometime in the future, I will finally write the history section that this dissertation would have benefited from.
Appendix A: Flowchart of Contact With Participants

**Solicit Volunteers**
- Approach fathers I know
- Post flyers at McGee Women’s Hospital
- Ask local childbirth educator to distribute my flyers at her class

**Contact Volunteers**
- Contact volunteers by telephone
- Discuss my project and outline their part in my research
- Address volunteers’ concerns and questions
- Arrange time and place to meet with volunteers

**Meet With Participants**
- Review and sign consent forms
- Answer any questions
- Conduct recorded conversation
Appendix B: Consent Form

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: On the Day You Were Born…: A Phenomenological Study of Fathers’ Experience of Being Present at Their Children’s Birth

INVESTIGATOR: Nick Williams, M.A.
219 S. Winebiddle St. Pittsburgh, PA 15224
(412) 441-5292

ADVISOR: (if applicable) Eva Simms, Ph.D.
Psychology Department
(412) 396-6515

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate fathers’ lived experience of being present at the birth of their children. In addition, you will be asked to allow me to interview you. The interview will take approximately 1-1.5 hours and will be conducted in a private room at Duquesne University. The interviews will be taped and transcribed. Finally, you will be asked to review preliminary research results and give feedback.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are no known risks involved in this study beyond those encountered in daily life. Participants in this study will have the opportunity to tell their own stories and to read their stories alongside others. Beyond the benefit of having a forum for his unique fathering experience, each participant will, by
contributing to this study, provide the psychological community with important insights into the shared and individual vicissitudes of becoming a father.

**COMPENSATION:**

There will be no compensation provided for your participation in this study. However, participation in the project will incur no monetary cost to you. An envelope is provided for return of your response to the investigator.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Your name will never appear on any research instruments. No identity will be made in the data analysis. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's home. Your response(s) will only appear in statistical data summaries. All identifying information (i.e. voice recordings and consent forms) will be destroyed at the completion of the research.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate as well as your response at any time.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:**

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:**

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Dr. Paul Richer, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board (412-396-6326).

Participant's Signature ___________________________ Date ______________

Researcher's Signature ___________________________ Date ______________
Appendix C: Conversation Focus Areas

(Please Note: the precise order of these areas may vary.)

**The Meaning of Fatherhood**

1. What does fatherhood mean to participant?

2. Who were participant’s male role models and what wisdom or knowledge did they impart to him about what it means to be a father?

**The Time Leading up to the Birth**

3. How did participant (and partner) prepare for the birth? How did participant (and partner) prepare specifically for his presence at/participation in the birth?

4. What were participant’s expectations about being at his child’s birth?

5. What did participant feel others (including his partner) expected of him at his child’s birth?

6. What sort of comments, advice, or warnings did others offer participant and how did these make him feel?

7. What were your hopes for the birth?

8. What were your concerns/fears regarding the birth?

9. Was this a planned pregnancy?

**Being at the Birth**

10. Participant should describe in as much detail as he can his experience of being present at his child’s birth.

11. How does participant feel his partner experienced the birth with him present?

**Other Significant Issues**

12. Is there anything else the participant would like me to know?
Appendix D: My Responses to Conversation Focus Questions

The Meaning of Fatherhood

1. What does fatherhood mean to participant?

Fatherhood, to me, represents a point at which I am no longer responsible for only myself. When I became a father I discovered that every decision I made was based, not on what was best for me or on what I wanted, but on how I felt it would affect my child and my partner. It really opened my eyes to the fact that my actions and decisions impact more people than just me.

But being a father, for me, also means that I relate differently to everybody I knew before I was a father. I remember when, shortly after Rose was born, all of the friends we used to hang out with started to find it more difficult to make it out to our house. I really started feeling like Shan and I were going it alone. I didn’t exactly feel abandoned, but I definitely got the sense that our new status as parents made our non-parent friends uncomfortable, like we had crossed some threshold that they were not able (or willing) to cross with us. Of course, we had Rose when we were relatively young, and now that the friends we have are all getting married and having babies of their own this is not so much an issue as it was then, but it was certainly an issue as I was learning what it meant to me to be a father.

Now that my two girls are growing up, I am discovering that being a father comes with both tremendous joy and tremendous sadness. At every point in Rose and Ella’s development I have found myself excited for the next step – I was excited to hear them speak and to leave diapers behind, and on and on. But in recognizing their ever-increasing independence I have also realized that their need for the kind of parenting and guidance is also changing. They are no longer my babies! I can’t help but think as I watch them grow up that we can never go back to an earlier time when Shan and I were the girls’ entire world, and I would be a liar if I said that this doesn’t make me sad. With every passing day I feel I can hear and see the R.O.W.’ (rest-of-the-world’s) influence in their attitudes, their preferences, and their behaviors. Still, I feel that my role as their guide and shepherd is very important. And recognizing how quickly they are growing up, it makes me all the more adamant about making sure I am as involved as I can be in their lives so I can be aware of who they are from day to day. I am excited to see where their paths take them and I hope to be an important and positive influence on them for as long as they will let me.

2. Who were participant’s male role models and what wisdom or knowledge did they impart to him about what it means to be a father?

My own father never really struck my as a role model for what it means to be a father. He was much older than my mother and came from the same generation as my maternal grandparents. I often felt that my relationship with my father was more of a friendship than a parent-child relationship. My father seemed to me to be more interested in relating to me as a peer and a partner-in-crime than as a role model. To
be honest, I don’t think I had too much in the way of instruction on how to be a father
from him.

When I was thirteen my parents were divorced and by the time I was fifteen my
mother remarried. My stepfather tried to show me the importance of hard work and I
feel that my ability to see a job through to the end I owe largely to him. At the same
time, I always felt that he was jealous of my closeness to my mother and this often
came between us, preventing him and me from having a closer relationship.

Most of what I have learned about being a father, I feel, I have learned by picking up
bits here and there – from books, from comments I remember from men I respected –
and have cobbled together to form some idea of what a good father is and does.

Ultimately, I think for the most part I am learning to be a father through trial and
error and a strong collaborative and communicative relationship with Shannon and
my children. Also (and this is very important), I think that being a good father entails
paying close attention to my intuition and appealing to my own experience and
memories of being a child. I often ask myself how I would feel, were I in my
children’s place, and usually I just know how I ought to react in a situation. That
doesn’t mean that I don’t make mistakes, but at least I feel like my decisions are the
best I can make given what I know at the time.

The Time Leading up to the Birth

3. How did participant (and partner) prepare for the birth? How did participant (and
partner) prepare specifically for his presence at/participation in the birth?

When we were pregnant with Rose I really had no idea what our options were or
what to hope for or expect. Fortunately, Shannon is very forward thinking and
started to explore birth options. Thanks to her, all I had to do was listen to what
different people told us and pay attention when we toured different facilities. When it
came time to decide where and how to birth our baby, I mostly deferred to Shannon’s
wishes, which was not difficult because I felt that her wishes were far more important
than my own and also that she and I were pretty much on the same page most of the
time anyway. As the birth drew near we attended a birth class together and met a few
other expectant couples. We talked a lot about a birth plan and how we hoped
everything would be at the birth. We decided to go to the Birthplace (which is now
defunct). Although there were a lot of great things about Rose’s birth, I was really
ill-prepared to deal with some of the things that made Shan’s experience more
difficult. For instance, there was a receptionist there who asked if she could watch
the birth. Since Shan did not seem to mind I told her it was okay. In retrospect, I
should have realized that it was my responsibility to know that this was a boundary to
maintain on my own, and that it was not a decision that Shannon should have been
asked to make while she was concentrating on the birth.

When we learned that we were pregnant the second time, things were very different.
Shannon and I were much more of a team in the decision-making process and I was
much more involved in her prenatal visits with our midwife. I was also just more
generally aware of how things were progressing, how Shannon was feeling, how Rose
was feeling about the prospect of a new baby, and how I was feeling about becoming
a dad in a new way. We chose to deliver the baby at home, with all of our friends upstairs and our midwife, nurse, and Shannon’s mother downstairs with us. The birth was amazing. The whole process just felt right to me. The energy in the space was palpable. The whole time, I stayed with Shannon and kept my gaze on hers. I massaged her back. I talked to her and told her how well she was doing. I was happy and excited with her. Shortly after Ella was born we held her together in our bed and welcomed our friends one at a time as they came in to greet this new little person and wish us well. It was beautiful.

I think the feeling I remember best from both births is how proud I felt, holding my new baby, as I carried them into the world for the first time. Proud of Shannon for carrying out the act of creation. Proud of my babies for being so strong and healthy and real. Proud of myself for doing what I could without knowing beforehand what I was capable of.

4. What were participant’s expectations about being at his child’s birth?

I think Shannon expected me to be with her and stay with her – not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well – the whole time. She wanted to see the excitement and love and wonder she felt reflected through me. And I think she wanted to know that I would be there to keep the world at bay – to not let it intrude on our sacred space – to protect her.

5. What did participant feel others (including his partner) expected of him at his child’s birth?

I don’t really know what others expected of me. I imagine that everybody just hoped that we had a safe and wonderful experience and that our babies and Shannon would be happy and healthy when all was said and done. I guess to that end, they expected me to do all I could to ensure that outcome.

6. What sort of comments, advice, or warnings did others offer participant and how did these make him feel?

Since our babies were born before any of our friends had had children, I did not get too much advice or warnings. I remember mostly a lot of encouragement and anticipation. Especially with Ella’s birth. When we were pregnant with Rose, many people thought we were too young and I definitely got the “I hope you know what you’re in for” vibe from friends and family. With Ella’s birth, people already knew us as parents who loved our child fiercely, so I think that people simply assumed that we already knew better than they what we could expect or what we should do at the birth. Mostly, people just gave us their love and support.

7. What were your hopes for the birth?

At Rose’s birth I was hoping that my baby was healthy and Shannon was healthy. I did not really have any other hopes or expectations that I can recall. I did not know
too much about all of the factors that go into a “good” birth experience, so my feelings stayed for the most part on the health & safety level.

At Ella’s birth I knew that Shannon needed my calm and steady presence to help her maintain hers so I hoped to be a better anchor for her than I had been at Rose’s birth. Of course I still hoped for a safe and healthy birth for everyone, but there had been no indications to the contrary throughout the pregnancy so I was not really worried. I guess I just hoped that Shannon came out of the birth feeling like she had had the experience she hoped to have and I hoped to help her achieve that any way I could.

8. What were your concerns/fears regarding the birth?

Like I said in the previous response, my concerns at Rose’s birth were primarily just about her and Shannon’s physical well being. It was not until after Rose’s birth that I began to understand that simply having a physically safe birth did not guarantee a positive experience. So when we were pregnant with Ella I was more concerned that Shannon might feel that her experience was not a positive one and that I would be responsible for it by not doing my part well enough.

9. Was this a planned pregnancy?

In both cases they were planned pregnancies. With Rose we were less methodical in our decision-making process, however.

**Being at the Birth**

10. Participant should describe in as much detail as he can his experience of being present at his child’s birth.

I remember the morning that Rose was born. I was getting ready for work when Shannon told me that she had been having some contractions since early that morning. I told her that I would call off work to stay with her and she said I should just go to work. Immediately upon saying that, her water broke. So I called my work to let them know we were having a baby, then we started to get ready to go to the birth center. By the time we got there a few hours later the contractions were pretty regular at about five minute intervals. Shannon’s family met us there and we played cards (or tried to – Shannon did not feel much like concentrating on games) for a while. As transition approached, Shannon and I stayed in the birth room (a bedroom with an adjoining bathroom) with the midwife, nurse, Shannon’s mother, and (of all people) the receptionist. I remember very clearly at one point Shannon turning pale and beginning to disappear behind her eyes. I did not know what to do or how to respond so I just held her and tried to be reassuring. Later, she told me that she was panicking and did not know how to stay there in her experience. Our midwife was not particularly friendly or supportive, although she was very capable in terms of the technical aspects of the birth. After Shannon delivered Rosalea, I could not bring myself to cut the umbilical cord, so Shannon cut it (a fact I am embarrassed to admit
- I was afraid that Rose would somehow blame me for severing that connection to her mother). Then I held Rose for the family to see as Shannon had to have a tear stitched up (what I later learned was an extremely painful experience).

For a long time after Rose's birth the disparity between Shannon's experience and my own was a very difficult topic for us to speak about. I did not want to allow the possibility that there were many negative aspects of the birth for Shannon because (I think) allowing that would threaten my own feeling that the birth had gone so well. At Ella’s birth I was much better prepared for the intangible factors that I could not deal with at Rose’s birth. Not only had we both prepared for Ella’s birth much better – by really learning about what is possible in birth, where it can happen, what you can ask of others, how other people have experienced their births, and so on – but I had also learned to accept that Shan’s experience of Rose’s birth and my own were very different. Letting myself understand that made it possible for me to really hear what Shannon needed from this birth. And like I have said before, Ella’s birth was magical. Shannon was powerful and present and I was her witness the whole time. We had the birth on our terms and I couldn’t have asked for a better experience.

11. How does participant feel his partner experienced the birth with him present?

I feel like Shannon really appreciated my effort to be as present and focused as I could on her needs and her experience at Ella’s birth. I know that she felt for a long time after Rose’s birth that I did not (and maybe would not) understand her feelings about the experience. She has told me that at Ella’s birth she felt reassured by my presence and that we were struggling together. I feel that the two of us grew much closer on that day because we were able to face the challenge as a unified partnership instead of being of two minds about our feelings, hopes, and fears.

Other Significant Issues

12. Is there anything else the participant would like me to know?

I think that it is vitally important for expectant fathers to realize that their presence at birth can be a transformative experience for them and that they need to work hard to understand what their partners need from them at that time. Also, it is important for men to speak with each other about their experiences about becoming and being fathers so that, eventually, future generations can benefit from the understanding that we can foster through opening up this area of discourse that is currently missing from our society.
Appendix E: Conversation With Pablo

Let me just ask you first if you have anything you want to say to start off.

I think I’m glad to be doing this with a friend, you know, a fellow – um… knowing that you’re a father helps me be more open about what I’m talking about because many times a father could think that they’re alone in this crazy journey.

Well I’m really glad to be sharing the experience with you because this is a new experience for me, being friends with fathers. I’ve been a father for a long time without having anybody else to talk with about it.

Let me just go ahead and ask you the first question I have which is, basically, what does fatherhood mean to you?

Well, I couldn’t tell you that I have a clear idea of what fatherhood means … When I found out that I was going to be a father, I wasn’t sure – my first question was, “Am I ready?” And my mom actually helped me, saying, “When are ever ready for something like that?” And that made me think about a lot of things, because I’m not sure what it takes to be a father, and my experience with fatherhood has been kind of ambiguous. My background – I don’t know how much you know about this, but my father left me and my mom in Chile when I was about three or four years old, and he came to live in the United States and I grew up with my mother, and so my father figures were mostly her boyfriends. And she wasn’t a boyfriend kind of person, but she was really trying to find someone who would be supportive as a father as well. And eventually she found someone. And my step dad, Joachim, he’s awesome, and he’s a father to me, you know what I mean? I grew up with him and even though he has two kids he was willing to take me like one of his own. And that’s important for me because I did have this kind of idealized figure of a father, you know what I mean? This guy who lives far away who only comes every once in a while and who would give me presents – I never had a bad time with my dad, you know what I mean? It was always good things, but what I didn’t know was that there were all these other layers that I would never experience for not living the daily life with him. And that’s what I came to find out when I came to live here in the States, you know – I don’t know how many years later – I’m seventeen, eighteen, and I move, live with him and I find out that he’s, you know, all the way trying to raise me, and kind of not realizing that I’m a sort of formed human being, and that was rough, because, you know, he brought up all these issues in me that, you know, “Oh, you should be doing this, you should be like this instead of being like this,” and all these things that sort of like, have made me revise myself. And I think that sometimes that’s what fatherhood does in a way, it brings you closer to the earth part of your existence – the down to earth, kind of bread on the table thing and even though that’s kind of a stereotypical view in a way… because I have a personal view of fatherhood which is much more motherly for that matter [laughs] you know; I do think that it has some kind of connotation because your mother brings you into the world and she’s your protector and it’s all sort of emotional energy and it’s like… and then, you know, I imagine later in life when you start having different kinds of concerns many times your father’s the only person who can help you with that and… But at the same time I think that, my view of
that has changed a lot, too, by experiencing it; like, I see Marie and myself as very close in terms of our mission, you know, and I think that I always tell her that I wish I had boobies [laughs] because right now it’s real hard for me to… she’s like… I can only settle Jaime down to some degree but then after that I’m hopeless. I imagine that there will be a time later when I’m the only one that can help him in a different kind of realm – and I think that’s important with fatherhood - that the father is always a complementary figure to the mother, you know what I mean? Not that they’re necessarily opposites, but they do bring a lot of learning to each other. Maybe… I don’t know if you’ve experienced this, but Marie, to me, represents a lot of the aspects of myself that I haven’t explored and vice-versa, you know. I think we teach things to each other all the time. And we sort of remind each other of who we are and who we want to be and who we are not and… The most important thing about that to me is that whatever image we create for a child, as parents, it’s also that we connect it to the image that we have as a couple, you know what I mean? I think that those are not three independent things. Many people say, “Oh, I’m going to have a child. I have to give up all these dreams and I have to… all the things that I wanted to do I can’t do them any more.”

Right.

Well, I see fatherhood as… how would you – what’s the word in English? When you have accomplish…

Accomplished?

No…

Do you mean accomplice?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Is that the word? Like your friend, like your partner in crime?

Yeah.

I feel like Jaime’s not going to stop me from doing anything, but if anything he’s going to be inspiration and he’s going to be help, you know? He going to be another set of hands to do whatever we need to do to keep on living happily.

So there’s a real functional aspect as well as the emotional?

I mean, I don’t see it as much as, “Yeah we’re going to bring to the family a little monkey to do our monkey work [both laugh] that we’re doing right now,” do you know what I mean? But I see it as, “We’re going to be doing what we do and we are going to share it with this person.” And I imagine him dancing with Marie, playing music with me, making artwork, and writing with us, you know – doing the things that we do as, as a family – versus… I think that a lot of people have an idea of fatherhood; I think my dad, for example, has a view of fatherhood as a sort of unbreakable hierarchical barrier where he is the father figure and I am the son and never will we be able to communicate one-to-
one or... I mean, he’s a very authoritative person. And I’m planning to be authoritative with Jaime but I’m also planning for him to – I’m going to leave space for him to be as... I mean we’re all human; I’m not going to be any wiser than him, I think. If anything, maybe I’ll have more experience, but... I don’t want to create this barrier of father and son as this learning dynamic, but I want it to be a friendship.

So as opposed to seeing your relationship with your son as one where you, as the father, have... maybe you have all the answers and your son is this kind of empty vessel just waiting to be filled up with your knowledge and wisdom...

That’s exactly what it is. I don’t think that I could have the capability that many people claim themselves to have to decide for their children what they’re going to be, you know what I mean? Like fathers who are like, “He’s going to be a doctor.” And they create all these expectations for their kid and sort of build this world. I mean, I do think he’s an empty vessel, full of opportunity, but what I’m going to do is going to try and, you know, encourage him in any direction that he’s going and all directions too. You know, I want him to be integral in that sense. I want him to learn whatever he wants to learn and make it sort of, mindfully... You know, there’s always a contradiction if there’s me having an idea of who he could be... But I think it’s about the method – I don’t think it’s about your expectations. I think that many parents have expectations and they create a method so that they can achieve that. For example, “My kid is going to go to this school, and do things like this, and he’s going to take lessons in business so that he’s going to graduate to become this,” you know what I mean? I think that... I want him to become whatever he becomes and that my method is going to be encouraging him in any direction that he’s choosing, and helping, you know what I mean? And if he’s interested in playing sports, which I would be terrified of [laughs] but at the same time I kind of have the openness to say. “Well there’s something good with sports as much as there is with anything else and I’m going to try to find him the best sport,” [laughs] do you know what I mean? I’ll try helping wisely according to how he is, or – you know what I mean? But I guess one thing is, I don’t think that I have the, the, um... No no no, I see fatherhood as this very dynamic thing; I think I’m going to meet him and we’re going to find out how we relate. We’re going to find out what his interests are. I think he’s an empty vessel but I think he carries already an immense amount of personality of his own, and background that I could never foresee. His personality is something that escapes my knowledge in a way and so... But I also have this kind of innate feeling that if I just do it the best I can and try to be the best I can be then it’s going to be fine. Back to what my mom said, when is the right time, you know? I don’t think there’s such a thing as the right time. I think there’s just the right attitude or a right mindset. Like when I decided I wanted to have him, is when I decided that there was no hesitation in that choice. And I think that many times, that could create a lot of problems if I were to be, like, “I didn’t want to have a child, I don’t know what to do with it.”

So you feel like, having made the decision, “It’s time. I’m ready to have a child,” made it, or makes it, easier to make the kind of decisions a parent makes?

[Pablo- Yeah.] To have the confidence that the decisions you make will ultimately turn out to be appropriate?
Well, when I decided I was going to have him, I basically decided that it was something that I wanted to do. I kind of, instead of saying, “Oh, what are my moral beliefs?” Or, “Oh, what are my projections of my life in the future?” Or having all those concerns that I think many people have, instead I thought, “Do I want to be a father? Do I want to have a child and have this person that I share with, and do I want to play and do I want to, you know, spend time teaching?” And when I looked at it that way I was like, “Yeah, I want to do that.”

So it was kind of pragmatic, what you were thinking, but in a different way than the way that you described, which maybe we could consider like a… You know, the kind of advice that I got a lot when we were pregnant with Rosalea was that practical future advice, you know: “You have to consider your career, and you have to consider what it’s going to mean for you and for Shannon in terms of your finances and where you’re going to be. You won’t be able to move as much as you might want to from one place to another.” Stuff like that. And that’s all very practical advice, but at the same time what you’re describing as the process of coming to accept your new title as father is also very practical but it’s in a different form...

Well, and we did think about the practical considerations, and we did think of, “Can we do this?” You know what I mean? But another part of me, which is more strong in me and is more important to me, is the kind of instinctive part that says, “All you need is love,” [laughs] you know? And some people have criticized me so much for thinking that way but I do believe it, you know? I think that you could be miserable in any other front, but if you have the love and the will then you are most likely to find a way, you know? And so I guess when I was asking myself all these questions there were practical questions, but there was also what to me are the big questions. For example, “Do I have the love and the energy to give to this person?” I didn’t think of money, because I don’t have money [laughs]. You know, I don’t have money. I don’t have money. [both laugh]

But things have been working out, and more and more I have been finding ways I can make money. And then I think that the kind of energy that I’m giving Jaime can be considered ideal. I give him so much. He’s never hungry, you know, he’s still… [laughs] I mean at this point I don’t have to do anything about his hunger [laughs] because he’s still nursing, but I figured out that what was most important was do I want this child or not, and when I imagined myself being a father I didn’t imagine myself working in an office to pay bills and figure out all that. I mean, I’m figuring that out now [laughs], but what I did picture myself was sort of like being with a person, holding someone in my arms, playing, talking to someone, you know what I mean, teaching someone something, traveling, all the things that I have to share and I think that’s what keeps me calm at nights when we don’t know how we’re going to pay next month’s rent.

And the other practical issues start rearing their ugly heads.

Yeah.
What sort of criticisms did other people throw at you about your “all you need is love” attitude?

Well, it’s funny you mentioned that because I go to CMU where people are very profit oriented, and they’re very serious about it too. And I think that there’s a big point to that which is that you can create a lot more commodities with money. But at the same time I have a different perception of what comfort is. But one friend was like, we were talking about something, whatever, it was what I was going to do and I was like, “Well, I’m not going to be working in a design company making crappy advertisements for GAP clothing,” you know? And so he was like, “But you have a baby now. What are you going to do when you can’t get his Pedialyte?” And I was like, “Well, first of all, I don’t even know what Pedialyte is.” [both laugh] “So he’s not going to need whatever that is. And then, when I need it, it will be there, you know.” When I need something it will be there. And people are like, [makes a guffawing sound]. You know, they think that… I mean, I think that there’s a big tendency to think that fate is related to fatality; like if you let things be you’re sort of setting yourself up for disaster. But at the same time I have a point of view which says that if you live your life to fit in a secured system of comfort and you don’t take any risks, you’re probably going to find yourself in your death bed realizing that you didn’t do anything and that you just kind of killed your time and you’re just, you know… I think that what I want to do is different than that. I want to think that I took every single chance possible and stepped on every single risky spot so that I could do what I wanted to do all throughout my life. And I have been. I have a beautiful apartment, a beautiful wife, a beautiful group of friends, community, beautiful child. I’ve been doing my music. I’ve been doing my painting. I’ve been, you know, I’ve been… And I’m lucky! And if I can keep on doing these things and living sort of a risky lifestyle where I don’t know when the next paycheck is going to come… but at the same time I’m being able to be at home and have fun with my family, you know, do things… I don’t know. I don’t know, I think… I don’t know if you know where I’m coming from. I have a different set of priorities than most people. I don’t think that money and that type of stability is really what we should be looking for as a lifetime experience. I think that that’s secondary. And I think that lifetime experience comes in realms that are much less physical, much less material. [pauses, laughs]

Let’s talk about your father a little bit more, before we get into the birth of your son.

Mmm hmmm.

You said that when you came to the United States, and you moved in with your father, you were already a teenager and you were already pretty well formed. And you said that your father’s attitude toward fathering was much more authoritative, authoritarian…

Mmm hmmm.
Did he have any advice for you? Did anybody have – any of the people that you consider your male role models – what sort of things did they say to you when they found out you were going to be a father?

[laughs] My dad was really angry at me, and he said something that was very powerful, and dark and light, both at the same time, which is something that I find to be very… very reality-like. [both laugh] He said to me, “You’ve signed your independence, boy.” [both laugh] Which, to me is evidently… he’s trying to be upset and he’s trying to be somewhat threatening, but at the same time what he’s saying has epic connotations in it. There’s something that he probably know about [laughs]. He was, I don’t know, the archetypal image of the father becoming a grandfather, the son becoming a father and this dichotomy of father and son being kicked up a notch [laughs]. I don’t think I declared my independence, you know. I think that my independence was always declared. I just kind of made him realize [laughs] – for the first time. Because I think that he wasn’t expecting something like this. He thinks I’m like the – he thinks I’m incredibly too young, and in his sort of sketch model of reality, I graduate school, I do my thing, you know, get a job at a company [chuckles], find someone, then get married, and then have a child, and… I can understand that must have been shocking for him to be such a young grandfather. He’s probably about forty-something, forty-five, forty-six. And that was his, you know, his thing was like, “You are no longer… I’m no longer responsible, you’re responsible for your life. You have to figure out how you’re going to deal,” you know. And it was true [laughs]. That’s what it was, you know? So… but I do find a lot of contradiction there, too, because at the same time I think that for the first time my dad and I from now on could approach each other from an adulthood point of view, and that he could finally listen to me for the first time as an adult. And what was hilarious about that relationship in relation to my son being born was that, you know, in the beginning he was scared!

Your father was?

Well, worried, scared, angry, and when he started getting a sense of the way Marie and I were handling things he, in the beginning, was kind of intimidated. You know, when I told him we were not having a hospital birth, that we were having a home birth, he was like, “Are you willing to risk your wife’s life, your son’s life for…” You know, he… And I was like… [laughs] “I’m not risking anything. I’m not putting anything into play. I’m just revising my options and trying to find what’s best.” And when we pulled it off, when we pulled the whole thing off and everything was so radiant and beautiful and everything magically worked out, he couldn’t believe it. [both laugh] He was like – he was even upset – he was like, “You guys pulled it off!” [both laugh] You know, and he loves Jaime and he slobbers all over him and in a way… You know, I look back on that time when he was upset and I laugh because I know that at the time I was laughing and I even told him. I was like, “You know that you’re going to come slobbering over the child” at one point, you know. So he went through a radical change and… But the whole independence deal was something that he took to be something that was big, you know? I would have thought that my independence would declare itself some other way. I wouldn’t think that that would do it, but at the same time, I don’t have a very rigid pattern
for the way that I live my life, you know what I mean? Everything about my life has been exceptions.

How so?

Well, the way that things have happened to me. I’ve always been in some kind of unconventional situation, either by having an unconventional family, or by being the one who never had to do any of the academic things that other kids were doing to get into the university because I was going to a university outside, and once getting here being the Chilean guy and, you know, having… I mean I’ve always had a sort of particular kind of situation. So to me it’s not new that I’m a young father and that I don’t even have a friggin’ job yet. I mean it’s something that… it’s one of those things that I don’t know how right people are in thinking that a certain way to do it is more proper than the other because I’ve found my way to be so proper [laughs]. Everything is going excellent, and… Many times I get… people challenge me and, you know, people react a lot to something like that, but at the same time, when they see me with the child, or see the way things are actually working out, many people are impressed. “How are you guys pulling it off so well and doing all these other things and just being able to…” Or like, “Everything is just working so good,” you know? But going back to your question, there’s a lot of advice that people have given me. And I’m lucky that I live in this sort of world-conscious community, you know, because there’s a lot of things that… I mean it’s been really helpful to have people around who I can talk to. But I don’t know if any sort of specific advice… Are you looking at things that I have to learn from… things about parenting that I may have to learn sort of by tradition? Or by…

Well, really I wasn’t looking for anything in particular, but I mean if anything comes to mind you could share it.

I don’t think that, in terms of, big things that people talk – I mean my dad didn’t give me any good advice at that time. He was kind of poking on my weakness at the time, you know. He was like, “Well, you don’t have money… What are you going to do about this, what are you going to do about this, how are you going to pay this bill, and how are you going to do this, and you don’t even blah blah blah, and you…” Do you know what I mean? And so I had to cut contact with him for a certain period of time where I needed to prepare myself for fuckin’ – you can delete that –

It’s all right.

For a fucking birth, man! [laughs] I am preparing myself for that, but in the meantime I have this sort of fly buzzing around my ear reminding me of all the things I am not. You know, that are tough considerations, you know? But obviously it was not stuff that I was not considering. It’s just – the last thing that I needed was someone undermining my optimism about my situation. Undermining my clear mind. I think that worrying like that can really sort of limit your intellectual capacity. And emotional capacity. I mean, man, we couldn’t have been able to make it if instead I wasn’t talking to my dad and I was talking to all my friends… We wouldn’t have been able to make it – if I would have
not been talking to my friends instead of my dad. [laughs] That’s what I meant. But my friends were like, “Dude, I’m so happy that you guys are doing this. You guys are going to be the coolest parents.” You know what I mean? Not even worrying about… My dad immediately was like, “What if he goes bottom first?” [laughs] or, “What if the cord is wrapped around his neck?” [laughs] and like…

What if, what if, what if…

Right! What if we considered every single thing that can go wrong and didn’t take a single step in our life because we are so afraid of breaking our comfort level? And it kind of ties back into what I was saying before. I believe in a system where you can take all the risks and if you try your best and if you spend a lot of energy and take the time to work things through and learn what you need to learn, you know, it’s better. ‘Cause I think in terms of advice at that time what helped me was to have people, instead of saying, “Oh my god, having a homebirth is scary. You guys better freak out,” [both laugh] I was having from my friends things like, “You might want to read this book, it talks about a lot of cool things you can do and it also mentions things that could go wrong so that you’d revise them.” And that’s what we did. [long pause]

Through having experienced a world where you are responsible for the reality around you, I realized I needed to put myself in a kind of extremely conscious and harmonious space for this birth, you know? I feel like if I would have freaked out during the birth, things could have gone wrong.

Do you feel that your calm, and peaceful, and optimistic presence played some part in the positive outcome of your birth?

Absolutely. Not only in the steps leading up to birth where I was able to make the right decisions and think calmly about what was the best thing to do, but also during the birth, so that I was constantly, you know, instead of thinking of all the things – all the ifs – and all the things that would, could, should, you know, happen. Instead, I was looking around me. And I was being aware of Marie’s face, and paying attention to the other sounds in the room, and making sure there was cold and warm water, and making, you know… Taking photographs, for that matter. I was making sure that it was going to be an experience that we could think back on and remember as this beautiful experience. And I think that that can’t happen if I would have been freaking out, smoking cigarettes on the back porch, biting my fingernails. I think it helped Marie so much, too. When her water broke, I was sitting down drawing, and her water broke and I was like, “What was that?” And she was like, “My water just broke.” And I was like, “Cool! So I guess we’re having this birth today, huh?” And she was like, “I guess so!” And we were like, okay well, do you want to take a bath or something? And I’ll go get the bed ready… and you know, let’s call Jennifer [laughs]. And, I mean, that made it what it was, because it’s such a physiological thing. Marie was able to relax, she was able to breathe better, so many things, you know what I mean? And in that sense, I want to emphasize this “question consensual reality” deal, because I think that if we would have gone to the hospital we would have had a horrible experience, compared to the magical experience we had from being at home, having everything go perfect. And you know, Marie getting
up to go pee thirty minutes after the birth, and us all having family bedtime that night. Waking up in the morning with our baby sleeping in our arms. Fuck, man. [laughs] What else could you ask for? Yeah, you could ask for this bed that you can press a remote control and it moves you back and forth and you could be watching sports on television and have someone take your baby away from you and, well first of all, dope you up, [laughs] and then take your baby away from you and measure him and cut him up and all this shit that… it’s bad. [laughs] Yeah…

Let’s talk about… we have been to some extent already, talking about your experience of leading up to the birth, when you were the expectant father [Pablo – mmm hmmm.] All right, let’s talk a little bit more about that.

About Marie’s pregnancy?

Yeah. Let’s see… I was going to ask you how you and Marie prepared for the birth, and specifically prepared for your presence at the birth. And I think that you’ve addressed that in a number of ways already, but do you want to speak more specifically about that?

Yeah, yeah! I mean, we were lucky that we have the sort of community who’s informed about birthing, and sort of alternative ways of birthing.

Alternative to hospitals?

Yeah, alternative to the majority of birthing that I think happens at this point. But I feel like, if I would have gone from scratch, I would have said, “Let’s go to the hospital.” You know?

You think you would have, had you not had the community…

I would have not known how to do it – yeah. I think that having a lot of people to support us and sort of convince us of the truth, which is that many times this method can be much more safe, and much more healthy, and just better. [laughs]

You’re talking about homebirth?

Yeah, homebirth. That was a big thing for me. And not just the homebirth, but just a certain type of lifestyle that can lead up to a better birth, like taking care of your diet, and stuff like taking responsibility for your sleep schedule, and… [laughs] Not that I did so much of that, but you know, I mean for me, it was just all trying to be in tune with Marie. Do you know what I mean? Like trying to make sure she wasn’t feeling hungry, which she was. I mean, there were points that there was nothing I could do. [laughs] But just trying to be there with her, and…

You said before that you feel like the role of the father in some ways is as a complement to the mother.
Mmm hmm.

That sounds a little like what you’re describing in terms of… like a lot of the preparations for… you know, a lot of the pregnancy work, basically. Of you being aware of Marie’s needs and trying to do what you could to respond to those needs, rather than just being aware of your own needs. Sort of letting your partner take care of herself…

Yeah, and just making sure that, I mean helping however I can because basically, at that point, a father could feel like there’s nothing for him to do, you know what I mean? But there is, there is. The thing is, I don’t know how other mothers are at that time, but, it’s a very rough time for a woman to go through. You know what I mean? And just in terms of… you have to… you are not only having this intense experience of birthing a child, that by the way comes out of a person’s vagina! [laughs] I don’t know if you’ve heard that. I mean, I don’t think people talk about that enough, you know what I mean? It’s a really intense thing. But not only that, but a woman throughout those nine months, I think you go through a process of, you know… after the baby’s born it grows into a child, and then it grows into a human. And in a lot of ways the mother has this kind of unconditional attachment to the person. But I guess my point was that everything that Marie’s going through can be either really awesome or really traumatic, you know what I mean? And I think that the support of the father at that time is essential. I mean, there were times when I had to be in school and I would be in school all day and get home at night and Marie would be crying. And thinking like, for whatever reason, sometimes it would even be like, “The kitchen is dirty.” [laughs] And I had to kind of realize it’s not about the kitchen, it’s not about anything like that, and sort of be comprehensive to the fact that she was having this major process and also through her I could find how I was going through a major process. You know?

How so?

Well, just the levels of awareness that you go through kind of change according to the evolution of the mother. Because the way the months are separated throughout that period, or the periods, you know, the way that the mom experiences different things – internal changes, physical changes of all kinds throughout that period – and you know, for me that’s sort of like a clear … not just evidence, but metaphor about the part of the process that we were at. You know what I mean? So, she was feeling sick. To me that was reflective of how… the kind of realization that we were having at that time, and the kind of acceptance of this birth that we were having at that time and then… I don’t know, things like the belly starts coming out and you start thinking, “Wow, you’re carrying this thing!” And then you get to see what’s in there, and then you know, it all of a sudden – you get to really see that there’s something there, but then all of a sudden it’s kicking. And [laughs], you know what I mean? And as this process is happening, you’re seeing all the internal stages too, of your father, of your growth as a parent. I don’t know if that’s clear or not. But to me, paying attention to Marie, paying attention to her moods, and paying attention to all her development was kind of telling me about what my role was. You know? I would know exactly what to do. I would know what she needed. And the thing is, I wanted to help because I didn’t have any other way to help, you know?
I didn’t have anything else to do. So that was, for me, what the pregnancy time was about. You know, so, I don’t know. Catching up with where I felt I was at, which I mean, while the pregnancy happened… throughout that period I had major, major, radical changes about… everything, for that matter. I mean, my whole perception of the world changed and has continued changing all throughout the development of my child. And now that he’s born, it’s also everything has changed – my perception of the world is completely changed. And I mean, it’s – the whole process happens, I feel like it makes sense how it happens, you know? First you find out about it and it’s like this ethereal concept and you’re like, “Ahh, a baby!” And you imagine this slobbery pile of person and you think, “Oh, I’m a father!” And you think of poopy diapers and high school, er, school. I don’t know. We have such a blurry image, but then, you know, all these changes start happening slowly. And then the birth happens and all these changes are fast! But it feels like, if Jaime had just popped, I wouldn’t have been ready for what is happening. And so I feel like part of that early process of Jaime being about to be born and throughout pregnancy it was about me sort of trying to tap on this rhythm, and trying to feel the development of the birth so that I would get all the right cues that would prepare me to be a father. Because I figure… you know how I said before, there’s no right time to be a father. But once you start being a father, that is the right time every second! [laughs] You know what I mean? But once you are a father, that’s it – you have to be a father.

So it’s an absolute kind of change.

Yeah! And I just didn’t know what would teach me how to be a father but I figured what would teach me to be a father is the experience of every moment. Especially through the pregnancy, too. You know what I mean?

It’s funny that you mentioned that. It made me think of what you were saying about your father and what he said to you when he found out that you were going to have a baby and consequently to become a father. And the way you described it was as this kind of fundamental change in the dynamics between you and your father. That no longer was it just that he’s the father and you’re the son, right? But now, he’s also the grandfather to your son, and that you two are...

Together in the task of fathering.

Yeah! You’re both fathers all of a sudden. And it really does change everything, doesn’t it.

Yeah, it does. It does change everything.

Well, I have to assume, based on everything you’ve said already, that you and Marie talked a lot about the birth.

Yeah.
And your hopes and fears and all of these things. What would you say were Marie’s expectations of you, in terms of your role in the pregnancy and birth?

Um…

Both explicit and implicit.

Explicit, I think she wanted me to be open to any kind of change that she would want to go through at the time of the birth. And we’re talking about the birth specifically, right?

Well, either time. Pregnancy or birth.

I mean, because we did have conversations like that about the pregnancy, the birth, and also the childhood. [laughs] So, I’m not sure exactly what, but I think in general she is expecting me to be involved. She’s expecting me to be open.

Open in what way?

You know, many times I think we should do this and this for the birth – whatever decision. And Marie would be like, “But, at the time of the birth I may want to go do this instead.” And so that was part of the deal, explicit from the beginning, was that I would, I was expected to sort of give input and help out and everything, but be open to any kind of change that would be according to Marie’s mood for the project.

So you needed to be flexible, in other words?

Yeah.

Even if you had this idea of what you hoped or wanted to happen, Marie was ultimately the one that was calling the shots?

Definitely. And also… I think that with Marie, though… it’s weird because I felt like she expected of me much less than what I was doing. So I think she was always really grateful. From the beginning she sometimes would say how happy she was that I was into doing this a certain way, and that I was into getting involved. Because we did talk a lot about me being in the birth as a key figure, with her and not just in the room kind of looking at what the midwife is doing, you know? But just an active role in… I think that she was really happy that none of the things that we talked about as possibilities for our birth plan were things that we were not agreeing on. You know what I mean? We both had an idea of what was best. And even though we have no idea if that is actually best [laughs], we kind of agreed on whatever that was. And so I think that she was happy about that from the beginning. I think that she expected me to, you know, I mean on the one hand she knew that, for the most part, that part of the process was hers, but I think she always expected me to take care of her and remind her of things, and…
Remind her of what?

You know, sometimes she would get frustrated and I would be like, “You know, your emotions are coming through into the child [laughs] and, you should be happy.” [laughs] Well, and not even that but sometimes remind her, like, “You shouldn’t drink coffee” or something, you know? Or remind her like, “We are doing this, yo. We know what we’re doing, we’ll be okay.”

Like many times she would expect me to ground her, I think. I mean, Marie’s one of the most grounded people I know, but many times… ‘cause since the beginning it was like… when we found out we were pregnant it was kind of I who convinced Marie it was the right thing and that we should do it. And she wasn’t so convinced. And I convinced her and then, I think that it’s good that I’m around to remind her that she’s not alone, you know what I mean? When she feel like, “Oh god, I shouldn’t have done this”, or, “I don’t know what to do now,” I think that she… I don’t want to call it expectations; I know that you mentioned what she was expecting of me, but I would say what she was counting on me for. And I think that was a big thing that she could count on me for the security that I’d be there to say, “We’ll be fine,” you know what I mean? Many times… And I mean, that’s a virtue that I have out of my pure lack of terrestrial concerns [laughs], you know what I mean? Like I – she could be feeling scared about, you know, “How we are going to pay for diapers,” and I will be, like, “Oh, don’t worry,” you know? “There’s more important things, and we’ll find a way. We’ll wipe his butt in the bathtub or something.” You know what I mean? I never, ever pause to feed those worries and I think she counted on me for that. To just kind of keep ourselves hopeful and strong and not fall into the temptation of feeling scared and the temptation of feeling like we’re not doing the right thing, or we don’t… I think that many times going through such a hard thing as the birth experience and the parenting experience someone could definitely easily go through, like, “Oh my god, do I have the energy of doing this – to do this? Can I really do this?” And I think that even though I had no idea what exactly needed to get done, or if we could do it or not, I would – I think Marie was counting on me for that security, that I would be like, “We’re fine.” [laughs] And you know what? Everything’s fine – it still is. We’ve been lucky, you could say, that everything has worked out and we’ve been able to figure things out. But in a way it’s nothing that we could expect before. You know what I mean? It’s all sort of coming to us and when we make the decisions as we go, I feel like we get a lot of good events happening to us instead of … But I think Marie’s counting on me for that optimism and certainty. You know what I mean? I’m not afraid of diversity [laughs] or, you know, I’m not afraid of … I don’t think my kid is not going to be able to have an education, even though if you ask me now, I have nowhere to get the money for him to go to school. You know what I mean? But that’s not the concern.

Right.

Right now I’m concerned with him learning to speak [laughs], learning to look at people, and I’m concerned with him being warm and happy. And… who knows? I mean maybe I’ve been wrong all along, but I have a feeling that keeping that certainty can sort of
maintain him secure too, you know? Pretty idealistic, but I think that you can make your dreams come true [laughs and mumbles some embarrassed remarks].

I like it - it’s touching.

But I know it’s a cliché, you know? But I do have sort of this innate feeling of thinking, if I do what I’m most passionate about and if I make good connections, and try my best, I don’t need to betray my morals. I don’t need to betray my well being to survive, because at this point in our human lifetime, I think we’re past survival stage and really what people are concerned with is commodity. And I have a very low standard for commodities. As you know, I don’t drive. I’ve had tons of criticisms on that, you know? And it’s like, “Yeah, maybe I’ll learn how to drive.” On the other hand, I’m not sure how much I want to be another driver out there and support that closed spiral of [laughs]… I mean, that’s going nowhere, you know? And at the same time people really think that that’s best. And I have another idea of what’s best. I don’t know. I have an overall feeling that if I live my life the best I can I don’t need money, I don’t need all these material goods. I can learn to appreciate the good little things of life, you know? Which I already have [laughs].

[Pause]

Most of these other questions that I have are not… nothing that we haven’t talked about already. Specifically, you… Well…

We can go through some stuff. I mean, I don’t mind repeating some of the things that I… if you have questions that…

I keep looking at some of the… all of these things… I sort of anticipated that throughout the discussions, just through our conversation that we would be talking about these things. And I have them listed more just to make sure for myself that we talked about them in one way or another, and I think we have. Let’s talk about the birth itself. For me this is really the bread and butter of the whole thing. Tell me about the birth.

Do you want me to talk about the…

Narrate your experience for me.

The spectacle… the external or the internal landscape? [laughs]

You tell me.

[laughs] Well, so I was drawing in the kitchen, and I was drawing a water bear [laughs], and the second that I finished drawing this water bear Marie’s water broke. I heard her – she was walking back and forth in the hallway and I heard [makes a “plooshk” sound]. And I was like, “What was that?” And she goes, “Uh oh…” And I was like, “What?” “My water broke.” And so I was like, “Okay, so we’re doing it.” And we did it. We
called our midwife and we called Jennifer, which was our doula and our great friend. And she came over and made some… you know, warmed some water and we just – it was like a very sort of mellow thing; and Marie had been having some contractions that day and we called the midwife to find out about it and she was like, “Oh no, it’s fine. You shouldn’t” – The length of the contractions was not the right length or something, so she was like, “No no, it would be different if you were [laughs] going to have the birth.” But so it wasn’t [laughs] and we were like, “Okay we’re going to have a birth.” And we… We had planned it before that we would do it in our bedroom, and so the first thing we did was put some plastic thingies in our bed.

Do you mean plastic sheets?

Yes. Plastic sheets. And got a lot of towels in the bedroom and… The birth was smooth and fast. By the time the midwife, Ellen, got to our house, Marie was eight centimeters dilated, which is almost ready to go. And she dilated in no time, and… And then she started having contractions and I was right behind her and putting pressure on her back – it was what hurt her the most. And at that point I could not put pressure on her back, basically, so she had a contraction and I would be there pushing, and then the contraction would be over and everyone would kind of scatter and run, get this, get that, get this and get ready here, get ready here, until we were all ready. And then I was just sitting; sitting there with her and the contractions got stronger (contractions, contractions, contractions – I have such a bad pronunciation with this [laughs] – contractions) got more continuous and longer and more intense and I was right there with her. And I was putting a towel of cold water on her forehead, and having her take little sips of water, and having her eat some Popsicles, and taking pictures, and I would breathe in her ear a lot so that she would breathe, too, you know? Just a reminder sometimes that, you know, when you have someone sitting next to you going like [inhales deeply through his nose and exhales through his mouth with an ahhhh sound], it makes you remember, “Oh yeah. I have lungs, and I can breathe.” And that, I think, was important, you know? And I was so relaxed [laughs]. Because basically… because of this experience that I had throughout the pregnancy I realized that whatever emotions and thoughts I was having were directly influential on the kind of things that were surrounding me and how things were happening around me and so one of the things that I had realized that I needed to do is focus my mind in my breathing and focus in the well-being of Marie, and, you know… to make sure that no bad thoughts or bad emotions would sort of hijack the operation or, you know, make someone nervous, or, I mean… It was a very delicate space, and to be able to handle it best I felt that my big responsibility was to keep myself very level-headed and keep my breathing going, and be able to maintain the space – quiet… I felt I had a lot of responsibility as the father. I was also kind of in charge of who came in and out of the house. I was also in charge of monitoring the volume level, and I was kind of a director in a way because Marie is having her very intimate moment and she doesn’t want to have to deal with… anything [laughs]. Also, at one point, as I’m sure you know, it gets so intense that she just can’t deal with anything, you know what I mean? And so I felt like I was her – her channel, in a way, into the world, you know, into our communication with the world. But at the same time, our midwife was so good, and she knew what was happening… And Jennifer also just helped so much in terms of bringing
that type of energy into our atmosphere. An energy where we’re all calm, we’re all happy, and ready to do this in the most gentle way possible.

Would you say that you felt like the protector of the space, and consequently of the process, and of your wife and child?

I felt very much like a protector, and I also felt like an emergency [laughs], an emergency specialist. So that I had put myself in the kind of mindset that I was ready for anything to happen at any time and I could have acted in the most rational way. Because, I mean, at that point you don’t know what to expect. But you can very easily get wrapped up in fear because there’s blood everywhere, and there is intense vibes, you know what I mean? And you could very easily get scared, or get dizzy, or get – you know? And… I wanted to be, you know… everyone can faint and everyone can freak out, but I’m going to be the one that, you know, will maintain that kind of rationality, you know. So… Just giving Marie this nonverbal support, you know what I mean? Most of the time I wasn’t even saying anything or doing anything but holding Marie’s hand, you know? And one can really easily think that those things are just like, “Oh whatever.” Like shmoopy things that, you know… But it’s actually very important, you know? It’s all very important for the outcome of the process – I think. And, [laughs]… I get away with… You know, I could totally say the statement, “In doing it like this it can guarantee you a perfect birth, because my birth was perfect only because we did it this way.” And I could be, like, bratty enough – or braggy enough to say that, you know what I mean? But at the same time maybe we’re just lucky… But we are so lucky if that’s the case, you know?

Well, I think that given the context of what we’ve been talking about already, about your approach to life as the eternal optimist and not just in this naïve sense where, you know, “Hey I’m optimistic! I think things are going to work out!” But also because of… an optimism rooted in a faith that what you put out into the world ultimately comes back…

And also the fact that when you’re happy, and when you’re excited, and when you’re motivated, things just work better. [laughs]

Yeah, well, it certainly affects… I mean, I think that probably most of us have experienced this at one time or another, when we’re in a bad mood… I feel often that when I’m in a bad mood that people don’t like me, and so it puts people in a bad mood, which in turn puts me in a worse mood, you know… And vice-versa. When I’m chipper, or when I’m feeling my most generous and compassionate, I feel that the world responds by drinking it up and slaking my thirst for compassion and generosity.

I think that’s definitely how things work with that, and I think that when you’ve experienced that to an extreme level, when you experience… I have experienced that very much to its peak where I’ve walked into a room and my down energy would literally make the space a big chaotic mess, you know? [laughs] And, I don’t think it’s pretentious to say that one person could affect the overall emotional field like that because, even since we’re babies, we’re receptive to such subtle changes of internal moods of other people; like a baby will see another baby make a sad face and offer the little pacifier or
something, you know? And things like that where – you can tell by someone’s very subtle look how they’re feeling. And we live in a world where we kind of dismiss that and we all don’t make eye contact and we all just go about our lives in a very scattered way, not realizing how much influence our expressiveness affects the world. And I think that little details like that can make something like a birth go good or bad, down to the level of not only emotional things which are obviously like that. If I would have been scared I would have freaked her out, you know what I mean? But also physical things, like what if Marie had been really scared and her tension made her bust an artery or something? Much more likely for things to wrong when you’re approaching them from a pessimist’s point of view to begin with, because you’re not giving the natural flow of things a chance. So we’re not in control basically.

Right. You could be braggy and say, “Things will go perfectly if you look at the world the way I do, and I can say that because things went perfectly for me.” And obviously it would be hard to swallow – that statement. But at the same time, for you, it seems very much like your experience bears out, or justifies your approach to life.

And I think its because I’ve been lucky to experience such drastic changes of mood. You know, sometimes I’ve been feeling so down that I’ve noticed how my entire life changes. And then when I’m happy and cheerful again, once again everything changes. I’ve been in extended crappy moods, sort of like a certain type of existential depression where days, things will go the wrongest possible and even things that I didn’t expect, like I couldn’t work at a computer or… Everything would just go wrong, like I would miss appointments and I would have arguments with people and then drastically I would change to a happy mood and all of a sudden things were matching up again and all these – everything would fall into place. There’s a big difference between living pessimistically and trying to arrange the world in accordance to what you want and living in optimism and letting things fall into place. They just fall into place [laughs].

Looking back, especially in talking with Marie about the birth, what has she said about your role in the birth? How does she characterize, or how does she describe her perception of your participation?

From the beginning she wanted me to be there. She knew that I was going to be with her, right there, the whole time. And basically that’s how it was. We had an agreement that I would be there for her for anything that she needed. And that I would also be doing my own thing, taking pictures and making the house smell nice, or doing whatever I needed to do. She, in herself, is very aware and informed about this umbrella of birthing flesh parenting method where you’re more in tune with the more natural qualities of a birth versus the thing where a person just gets dropped into the world. So she, in herself, is aware that the father can play a big role and that this is as much my thing as it is her thing. She would always be ready to open any kind of decision to discussion with me. Together we made the birth plan, which means we both decided who was and who was not going to be there the moment of the birth. We both decided what we were and were not doing at the moment of the birth. It was a very shared process and I was involved with her to the most minimal detail. If you think of something like pereneal massage;
that’s something that she couldn’t do on her own. However, it’s important, very important – very preventative but at the same time it wasn’t just an activity to prevent damage at the moment of the birth, but it was also this instance for us – for me to have this sort of physical influence on the outcome of the birth, you know? [Laughs] We are talking about perineal massage but it’s just one example of how the birth of Jaime was something that was an equal concern for both of us and I think that she would have been real disappointed if at any time I was like, “Go have your baby,” you know what I mean? Or I would have been like, “Oh do whatever you want at the birth.” I did say, “Do whatever you want,” but I also said, “But I would like this. How would you feel about that?” [Laughs]

Do you feel that she was appreciative that not only were you listening to what she wanted but that you also had feelings and opinions and desires of your own?

Yeah. At points we went through a few arguments where I interfered a little bit with decisions she was making where I was like, “I want to say something about that.” And sometimes we’d have a disagreement on the birth plan and I felt comfortable saying, “No Marie, I think we shouldn’t have our birth like that.” I felt comfortable saying that because I know that my role is important, but also because she gave me that comfort. She provided a space where I felt, and I knew, that I was a big part of this birth. But I do think that if she wouldn’t have had that openness… Well first of all I probably wouldn’t have been with her because obviously she matches my ideal. But if she wouldn’t have had that openness to allow me to bring my opinion into this I probably would have addressed that with her. I would have said, “Listen, it’s my baby too. Sorry that it has to come out of your vagina and hang on your boobs for the rest of the time, but it’s my son and I have an equal responsibility. And anything that I can do to redeem myself for not having to go through your pain, I will do.” And in a way I think that a big thing that must have been going on somewhat subconsciously in my head was, “I want to be going through what you’re going through. I want to share every moment of what you’re feeling because I know that this baby is as much mine as it is your and I wish that we could share the pain.” And I think that that was a big motivator for me to try to be involved, to know that she was doing this big part of the job for our baby. And so that just by inertia I had to do a part of the job that was equally painful, just not in the same way.

What you are describing – it’s uncanny – the way you describe it is very much the way that I felt and still feel about being a dad, about being a father, especially during pregnancy. I really felt jealous, in a way. Glad, but jealous. That I didn’t get to go through the more concrete experience, where it was clear and present for anybody who was curious what was going on in my world. “Oh you must be pregnant. You have a big belly, your breasts are getting bigger, your complexion is clear and glowing. Obviously you’re pregnant, right?” But for a dad we don’t have that.

Yeah! And we don’t get any kind of credit either. From society’s standpoint the father is very isolated and people’s view of parenting and view of birth… We can change that and we are changing it by doing this.
That’s certainly a goal.

And I think one of those issues where the subliminal division between males and females comes to my head is that we can’t do that part. We don’t have boobs, and when he, or she, is crying he’s going to go back to the mom. But, I feel like... I’m into sacred geometry, and the zigzag line has had cultural and historical connotations of being this union of two opposites. An arrow pointing up, which represents the sky and an arrow pointing down, which represents the earth. And the arrow pointing up and representing the sky is many times related to a male figure, pointing up...

It seems kind of phallic.

It’s a very phallic symbol and also the idea of a subdued earth, because the arrow pointing down is the earth and the mother-womb. And in a way I think that there is a lot of symbolism in the fact that the mother sort of brings the world into this terrestrial realm, and the mother is embracing in a very developmental stage of a human. And then, when the kid is kind of looking up, into all these other issues... I think that my role, my pain... I think my vaginal pain is going to come when the child becomes a boy, and when the boy becomes a man. And the same thing for a girl.

That’s similar to your situation with your father, then?

Yeah. That’s exactly how it was for us. And I think that makes a lot of sense in my head. That right now, I can’t do the job that Marie’s doing. But later I’ll have a job of my own that no one else can do.

In terms of this project, I don’t have any more questions, but I would like to leave whatever space you would like to have if there is something else that you would like to add, if there is anything you would like to talk about that we haven’t talked about.

I feel like we’ve talked about a lot of things. We haven’t addressed much the idea of fear, and I think that that’s important that I say a little something about it.

Yes, please.

Even though I’m an optimist I do have fears as a father, and there are a lot of things that I fear, that I don’t know what to expect. And I try to keep my way of thinking open so that I can have rational fears and not overflow myself with worry. But I guess one of my big fears is, having had this fatherhood event happen to me when I haven’t fully developed myself as an adult. And who knows when that moment is, but that was one of my big crises during Marie’s pregnancy. Realizing that I’m creating a human without fully having developed my humanity. It has to do with practical things, too, like “Who am I? What do I do?” I don’t know that yet. I know that I have certain inclinations, but I don’t know who I am yet. And so that’s one of the big concerns, and I guess that’s every father’s concern. “What do I give my child that is best?” How can we do that? And I don’t know if there is an ultimate answer to that, but many times my fear comes from
thinking that I’m doing great but one day I might find out that I was lacking on a certain front and my child is suffering from that. That’s a fear that… If fatherhood were addressed better by our – our communal mind, let’s call it – I feel like that’s an issue that would be big, because if you think about it, a mother’s concerns are many times more immediate. Marie is having to worry about how he’s feeling, if he’s feeling sleepy, is he eating enough, is he feeling protected and comfortable, is he having the right kind of eating and sleeping cycles; he’s demanding a lot of attention right now, and I can give that attention, but only so much of it. But I think that fathers would generally probably be more concerned about the later issues. And I think that particularly, a fear for me, is from a guy-to-guy standpoint, like father and son, you know? And there’s all these cultural connotations, too. I don’t necessarily want to purport a separation between male and female…

Do you mean in terms of gender roles and gender identity?

Yeah. But I do think that a father and his son is a very complicated situation.

You have a lot of myths to cope with. There are a lot of stories dating back to our origin dealing specifically with that relationship.

And to me, the core of that dilemma is… I don’t know really. But I think there is a big dilemma about… You know, the warrior – “Who am I going to become?”

You’re asking yourself who you are going to become?

[Laughs] Well, this thing between boys, of our role in the world. I don’t know. For some reason women seem to have a much easier time living their friggin’ life. And us guys are stuck with this ego dynamic where we want to be “The Shit.” [Laughs]

Do you mean men feel the need to take up the role of the hero?

Exactly! Like we want to become successful, and all these things that I’m probably not going to be the best at providing for my child considering that I haven’t really developed that for myself.

Providing what, in terms of the hero myth?

I don’t know. There’s this certain level of ambition, maybe. Or the idea that you have to achieve something in its own. I feel like it’s a male thing, although I’m not sure. From my experience with my father I’ve felt this kind of – existential pressure, let’s call it, where I feel like I’m expected to be a certain type of achiever, or I’m expected to create great change in the world, or just be really successful, or make a lot of money [laughs]. I don’t know what it is, but I think what is hard for me is to think of what my child could criticize about me for what I didn’t give him. For example, a friggin’ business background to give a completely superficial example. That could, however, be important
to him, you know? So that’s a big fear. To think of what I think is best based on what I’ve created for myself versus what he may think is best, based on whoever he becomes.

That’s one of those fears that—there’s no way you could confirm or deny the basis or the outcome until it’s much too late to make changes to your approach.

Yeah, Yeah! That’s very well put, actually. That’s definitely one of the things that was trying to come out of my mouth, that you just said. It’s the exact truth. You can only do it as you’re going, and so many times you look back and you say, “Oh, there are certain things that I said that maybe I should have said a different way.” Or sometimes you’re in a bad mood and you say something that, without realizing it, you’ve changed this child’s experience forever, and it’s a very delicate subject matter that you want to try and do your best at. But at the same time, for being a young father, I think that I have more insecurities on that front than a normal father [laughs]—well, a not-so-young father, because I feel like I’m still dealing with finding my manhood in this world, finding my hero, finding my role. And I’m afraid many times that I won’t be sufficient in providing something for him since I haven’t provided it for myself. So that’s a big fear, and it’s kind of an oscillating type of fear, where many times I think, “Oh, I’m doing great. I’m doing my best. That’s all I need to do.” And sometimes through someone’s comments, for example, talking about a pedialyte, I will open a series of scary boxes in my head and sort of create these insecurities. You know?

“Why don’t I know what Pedialyte is? Should I know? Am I a bad father for not knowing what Pedialyte is?”

Right! Is Pedialyte a required feature of fatherhood? Or something like a necessary initiation ritual for kids, you know what I mean? What could Pedialyte be? Just that, just the fact that someone else thinks that in reality Pedialyte is part of the essential development of a child. And I’m telling you all this without knowing what Pedialyte is, which must make it that much more entertaining for you, and just kind of fun, right? It’s that, maybe I’m talking about something that’s essential, maybe it’s this retarded little thing that people have conventionally agreed upon that it’s best for a child to have, I have no idea. But someone saying something like that opens a lot of boxes of uncertainty and fear, and maybe sometimes just curiosity, you know? What if there are all these other things that I never find out that would have been great for my child. But other times I feel this relief of thinking that, if I’m aware of this, and I’m consciously trying to maintain my self aware and maintain myself concerned and supportive, that what I need to know will come to me, and what I need to have will show itself. So maybe, if I really need a pedialyte, maybe after this conversation you’ll tell me, “This is what a pedialyte is,” and I’ll be like, “Oh, maybe I’ll get one of those. Where can I get one?”

Well put.

Are we done?
Are we done?

Yeah… I’ve told you certainly all the most important things that I’ve experienced and if there is something that I remember I will call you.

Okay. Thanks a lot.
Appendix F: Conversation With Ethan

Do you want me to start or do you have something to say right of the bat?

Well, I was going to say that Jenny’s birth and becoming a father, or having Jenny, was extraordinary circumstances due to her conditions.

Ok.

So it isn’t that typical, I don’t think. I mean it might be – it might be if I heard all the interviews. But to me it seemed like an abnormal situation.

Alright...

Do you want me to just talk about it or do you want to start?

Yeah, go ahead and talk about it.

Well, me and Jenny’s mother, Hanna, got pregnant in 1994, I guess it would be. I was 21 and so was her mother. And we were both okay with the birth – it wasn’t super planned. I mean the pregnancy, rather. We went to have a sonogram, and at the sonogram we found out there were going to be complications. And I can remember being very happy and playful at the sonogram, like we were joking around, and we got the sonogram [???] fairly typical, I mean, being at the doctor’s didn’t stress us out or anything. There was excitement and anticipation. But the nurse looked at the sonogram and just, like, wanted to go do something or go talk to someone or something. And then she came back and said there seemed to be complications, like the child could have Down’s syndrome. Maybe, maybe not, but looks very much like it could be the case. Which to me, I had had no experience whatsoever with anything like that; nothing in my family, nothing in the neighborhood, no contact at all with the handicapped. I was really in tune with lots of causes in life, you know, poverty, race, gender, or something, but never handicapped causes. It was very shocking to me, and I was thinking, some way, being young, maybe growing up mostly fatherless – you know, I had nowhere to put the information. On the spot I definitely couldn’t file it anywhere. I didn’t… It just was really overwhelming in some ways. And sad, I guess, is how I felt about it. And so like immediately we got introduced to a bunch of different specialists and doctors, you know. And social workers – all kinds of people. It was government insurance that we had, and everyone kind of… From that point on the pregnancy didn’t seem so much our own. It seemed like we were doing things on other people’s time and other people’s energy. You know, it didn’t seem like our experience any more in some ways because we needed so much help from other people, the medical field, I guess – the medical establishment. I guess those people who were asking us to not have the baby, there were reasons for that, like money, or whatever. Complications being young, it was hard to know. Either way, we got a doctor, we got other tests done, some tests that were now more scary. Like she had a test where I guess they puncture the stomach with a long needle to get to the fluid…
Is it amniocentesis?

That’s right, yeah. And so we waited for our results and went home and, this was ten years ago so I don’t remember exactly how it went down, but that’s what I remember clearly.
An interesting thing happened; I was in the waiting room, or in the hallway, and there was this intersection of four hallways. And we were talking to a new doctor but we were just in the hallway and he was like telling us stuff, and this guy came running down the hall, and he had stolen people’s purses and was like trying to leave the hospital, and there were these old women chasing him, screaming “purse snatcher!” And I had so much anger and frustration, everything was like a whirlwind. So like this guy ran past me but then me and one of the janitors went after him and chased him down and tackled him and wrestled the purses from him. It was just like, the feeling I was having, it was quite a release to be able to do that, you know. Cause I needed to put my emotions somewhere and that was the perfect place to put them. But anyway, that’s kind of a side note. That was such a crazy busy day. I mean when I remember that it’s all kind of swirling, you know.

Was that the day of the amniocentesis?

This was the same day that we found out. We had the amniocentesis immediately.

Oh. So that was really an intense day.

It was an intense day, yeah! We found out and instead of going in and having the sonogram and leaving, we were there like all afternoon and into the early evening.

So I imagine it was made even more difficult because your expectations were so different from the outcome?

Yeah. Yeah. And there wasn’t just like the news and then processing it. There was like, there were more questions to think about. You might think, if you got that news, oh that’s news, it might be bad, it might not be, but you know, it’s news. But it was more complicated than that, there were all these new choices to make and thing to consider and, you know. And me and Jenny’s mother had to talk about all these things and there wasn’t a lot of time. Like, we were getting passed around between different people at the time. But so we made it through that day and we talked to our parents and Jenny’s mother, Hanna, was very… intent on wanting to have the child. [pause] I was probably not so sure, but wouldn’t tell her not to, you know. I didn’t feel like I had the right, or I didn’t have the opinion so much that I wanted to push the issue either, to not have the child. And my family and other people who were influential in my life also felt that we should have the child, that it would be a good thing. Maybe that even the doctors could be wrong also. Really, in hindsight I think it was bad advice and bad guidance.

To assume that the doctors may be wrong?
Right, yeah.

**Why do you think it was bad advice?**

Because it put hope in a place that didn’t have room for as much hope as we put there. It’s better than, you know, God will take care of you, the universe will take care of you, your life will be good, the child will be great. Better advice would be, possibly – I would give to someone after going through this is, it could be really hard, it could be really challenging, but you are the people it was meant to happen to, for a reason maybe. You should look at that, but it’s going to be hard and challenging. You need to get your emotions and your mind straight on what you’re doing. More than looking toward the “not,” looking toward what’s going to come in nine months, you know, and how you’re going to deal with it. So the nine months went fairly well, I mean, yeah we just did normal things. Picking out baby names, and we came up with Jenny.

**How far along in the pregnancy were you when you had this news?**

How early can you have a sonogram?

I could be off with this, but I’m thinking that sonograms happen around six or eight weeks, but…

It was later than that, but not much. I’d say between eight weeks and sixteen weeks.

Okay. So somewhere between the end of the first trimester and the middle of the second.

Yeah.

So you were picking baby names…

Yeah, and feeling the baby. She moved around, you know? Fairly normal. It wasn’t super kicky. You know, after having a second child, you know, Sam moved around a lot. But it was happy because I was happy to be a father, but there was a lot of anxiety and unknowing and a lot of sadness I think also, and some hope. I don’t know, it was very… there were a lot of emotions. It wasn’t one solid emotion, like I’m just happy to be a father, you know. There was lots of doubting. And I wasn’t quite sure why the child would be handicapped. You know, was it me, genetically? It turns out that wasn’t the case, but it was a huge concern at the time, because partially, in deciding whether to keep the child or not, I would consider that if it’s me and I have a genetic problem that would lead to that then I should keep the child, because that’s just the nature of it, that’s just the nature of me and my life and what’s meant for me. But if was not that and it was something else, then maybe it’s better to just let this child pass and try again, you know? Some other time. I don’t know, there’s lots of things to consider. We kept the child, which would not go with the reasoning I just gave you but there were other things to consider also. And it turned out, we went to the doctor again and she had a heart
murmur, which is pretty common with Down’s syndrome babies. They also said that there could be more problems.

**More physical problems?**

Yeah. Like just in that fluid of creation they were coming up with all kinds of things that they didn’t think were right, that something wasn’t going right. So there were chances that the baby wouldn’t even live. So part of it was like hoping, praying that the child would live and be healthy, you know. Or that if the child wasn’t meant to live that it would die. But like, it’s hard to consider those things when this is happening within the mother, and part of it’s her, you know? It’s her body and it’s happening there. I think the toughest thing was… in my experience, it’s hard for couples to sometimes stay focused together in what maybe you perceive is a tragedy or a really hard time, you know. And it’s good to be of one mind about that stuff, and I think we were pretty much, other than that it was happening within her. So we had different perspectives to a degree, you know. And we were different people, so we would see things differently, but we never were divided in terms of decisions and what we would do. We made the decisions together, which I think was important.

Later on in the pregnancy we found out that the heart murmur was really bad – she had a fairly bad case of a heart murmur and that she would need heart surgery roughly three to six months after being born.

**Wow.**

Right. That she would be born and they would wait to do the surgery until she had gotten to a certain weight. And at that point, if and when she made it to that weight, the heart surgery would be more effective and last longer, so it didn’t make sense to do it to a newborn. So we would take her home from the hospital, she would get stronger, you know, she could deal with the problem until she could have [the surgery] was the thought about it. So we knew that going into it. And that was a sad day. It was a hard day, because we were looking at it, I guess, through a… It would be the same as a sonogram but they were looking directly at the child’s heart and this was later on in the pregnancy, so they could see exactly what was going on in the valves, and we were watching it on a TV. screen, and watching the heart pump, and watching how it would lose blood. But the doctor, in a moment of complete rudeness, called over one of the medical students and started talking about the degree of it and what was happening in front of us as if we weren’t in the room. And caused a lot of emotions in Hanna, you know, she started crying as it was happening. And looking back on it, I wish I would have told them both to just shut the hell up, you know what I mean? But because we were so needy to these people – it wasn’t a birth that we could conceive of on our own – I kind of got the feeling I was on other people’s time, like I’ve said before. So, it was hard. I didn’t feel like I had rights in some ways, you know?

**So you felt like, because you were so…**

Dependent.
Dependent on the medical establishment, that you were sort of, you had to do whatever they demanded of you?

Yeah.

Whether that was that you submitted yourself to tests, or to be turned into this object of study…

Yeah yeah yeah! But whatever. You know, it’s like, I’m asking them to check on my child, in a sense, and like to do things. Like, you’re meeting with heart surgeons, you’re meeting with other specialists, you know what I mean? They’re gonna save your child, so you feel slightly indebted to them. I mean, I do. Because she’s alive and they saved her, you know? So nothing can take that away. That’s a gift, you know?

So she did undergo the heart surgery?

Oh yeah. So anyway, it gets kind of… To the birth. Her mother was really wanting to do a birth with no pain medication. And they really opted against that. They felt that she should be drugged. Not with an epidural. They felt she should have something to calm her down because there might be… there were problems with the baby, they didn’t really know what to expect with the child. But she opted to have a natural birth, in terms of no drugs, in the hospital. And she handled the labor well. It went well. We went in there at like four in the afternoon, and again – there was, like, excitement, hope, feeling good, and then there was, like, fear, and anxiety, and I think some shame. I’m not sure why. My own situation wouldn’t call for shame, but I feel like I had some, related to it for some reason. I think I took a lot of it personally.

Do you mean by that that you were still… You mentioned a moment ago that you were not sure if this was maybe somehow your fault [Pablo – Yeah, right.] Is that what you mean by that?

Yeah. Like, if I ever felt inadequate as a teenager or something, and I was just coming out of being a teenager, if there’s something wrong with me, this would validate that there was possibly, you know? To some degree. I mean I don’t… I can say that now, looking back on it but I’m not sure. I don’t know if I felt that way exactly then. But still there were a lot of emotions going into the birth. And what’s more, I had family support, Hanna was doing really well, there wasn’t any really extra-special thing they were doing. They had on of those things they have hooked up to her belly – a kind of monitor…

An external fetal heart monitor?

Yeah yeah yeah. Exactly. They had one of those. It wasn’t like intrusive or anything. It was like, okay good, make sure it’s working, it’s helpful as a tool, you know? At one point they decided they needed to break the water, which I’m not sure why they needed to do that. But I really felt like I was turning over to an authority who was more
equipped to deal with what I was going through. Yeah, there wasn’t a problem that way, that people might have when they’re [???] trying to spend everything they can on the birth. But I didn’t mind. I remember actually Hanna didn’t like the idea about this because it was like this long sewing needle that you would try to break the water with. She didn’t feel really comfortable with that, you know? But there were other things to worry about, you know what I mean? I mean, the mood of the nurse or the doctor was not important to us, you know? Whether they were pushy or whether they weren’t wasn’t important to us. We had our own thing going on in our family that we were concerned about. We were getting closer, we went in there in the afternoon like I said, at like four in the afternoon, and by ten or eleven o’clock things were getting… coming along. The contractions were getting closer, and they kept on pushing for her to take medicine but she wasn’t going to take medicine. She felt like the child could have enough trouble without being drugged, and she didn’t want to drug the child. And she wanted to be completely alert, didn’t want the epidural, to make sure she could give as much as she could to the child because the child might really need it, you know? Our personal doctor, who was a young girl form Regent Square, who we really trusted, she was new to being a doctor, but we really liked her and we trusted her, wasn’t there until early evening, maybe after dinner. And she really started pushing that we should have the epidural. And we held off and held off and at some point this doctor came in and I don’t know if he was a geneticist or what, but he gave us this, like, poured all this possible bad news on us like, “you might not recognize the child, the child might have all these problems, I just want you to be aware.” And it was so out of hand. Like there was no reason why this man should have come in and said that. If he needed to, maybe he should have told my mother if he had to say it by law or something, I don’t know, or pulled me aside, or something. But his information… we had already been through this for like six months. There was no need for him to be there right then, like right before we were about to go on stage, you know. It was totally out of hand. And I think that offset the tone and my girlfriend, Hanna, agreed to have the epidural.

Do you think it was because of the effect of everybody…

Yeah. The energy – he sucked a lot of the energy out of the room. We were doing well and that was a little bit of a crash. Yeah. It was uncalled-for. I’m not quite… I had never seen him before, you know. And I don’t know why, how he found our room, or why he was there, you know?

Maybe he was just the negotiator.

I don’t know what he was. He was like some bad-news man. It was crazy. I can almost remember what he looked like. And at that point our doctor said that labor could last another twelve hours. And Hanna was really feeling like she was at the end. We got the epidural and she had the child within the hour. It made no sense that she got the epidural, you know. Yeah, within an hour the baby was born. And that part was exciting. We got a young girl in there who was super high-energy, a super good coach. She looked like she had just come out of a class at Pitt or something. She was really young and we got on the stretcher and rolled into the delivery room and she was really powerful and we had
left the epidural, and left that guy and left that room, you know. And had the child. She pushed and the baby came out. They cut the cord. I though I would, because I had been to both of my sisters’ births because they were both born at home, and I had cut my first sister’s cord. But I didn’t know if that was an option – I wasn’t thinking about cutting cords in this situation. Later I would think I would cut Sam’s, but when it came time, I couldn’t do it. It had been a long night. My sister cut it, which was neat, because I had clipped her cord and she cut Sam’s cord. So like helping each other come into the world. Yeah, it was nice.

So, we had Jenny. She came out, they did some things, she was crying. She was okay, they weighed her. She didn’t look like anything was wrong with her, she looked like a little baby, you know? She didn’t look like she had Down’s syndrome, she just looked like a baby. And that was it. I guess they might have taken her for a little while to run some tests on her vitals more than they would have on a normal child. And then we got her back and we just hung out with her. And we just sat there with her, and we just took turns with her. Her mom didn’t seem very attached with her – she was a little stressed out from the whole thing. There was just a lot of emotions involved. Oh! That’s what it was. She held her and then we put her in this little bassinet thing. I remember looking and was like if she doesn’t hold her someone’s got to hold her and it was like I immediately realized this was my child and it’s upon me to take care of this child, you know? And that was like, as soon as we got her. There was an immediate connection and all of the trouble, for the moment, was behind me, and it was just me and my child and my girlfriend at the time.

What was that like for you? When you had this realization, when you see this baby in the bassinet and you have this sort of dawning realization that “this is my child. I’m a father now,” what was that like for you, if you can remember?

I think it carried an extra punch, because I felt like this child is gonna need special care and it’s me that’s going to give it. Like with Sam I felt the same way, but I felt like “I’m gonna kind of help him along the way.” You know what I mean? Like I’m going to show him and then he’s gonna do it. But this child… I don’t know, there was a different feeling. I guess it’s hard… I recognize it as different now, having another child, but at the time I just felt extremely… like it was just me and the child. It was like, this child has needs. I’m that provider. It’s almost like being a god to this child. No one else could do it but me. It will take a lot more energy to sustain this child than it did to create it and I’m there to sustain this child. I don’t know. It felt like being a father would, yeah. It felt good. I never grew up having a father, so it didn’t feel familiar. It felt unique in a lot of ways. Like, between the troubles and everything, but it felt like it was my story, my thing to be this child’s provider. It felt good. I felt kind of privileged, you know, in some ways, because I felt like it was an extra task. And from the beginning, I was more involved – looking back on it, I was more involved in the child’s everyday needs because she couldn’t nurse, because she couldn’t breathe, because she wasn’t getting enough blood in her bloodstream.

Because of her heart murmur?
Yeah. So she was losing blood so she was losing breath and she couldn’t latch on. So what we would have to do is, her mother would pump milk and then we’d get a long plastic syringe that we attached a catheter to, and then you would put the catheter on your finger and she would nurse your finger. And that’s how I fed her. So between her mother nursing and I felt like I was a little better at it. I ended up doing it a lot. And her mom would spend a lot of time trying to get her to nurse, and nursing very slowly. Like with the catheter, you could push with the syringe. It was hard to hold her and force the syringe in to nurse her. It was interesting, you know? I did it a lot. And so yeah, I was equally responsible for feeding her as her mother. If not more, because I had more strength to do it, you know? It was interesting too because I had a good friend and I let him do it sometimes. Not often but once or twice, you know.

How did the mother feel about you being, like you said, sort of more involved in the feeding than she was?

I think in some ways she probably… I think she appreciated it, you know? That I was willing to do it. She may or may not have, but I was willing to do it. I think she longed… she wanted to breastfeed and she had the Le Leche league and other people helping her, and she tried her best. I can imagine, though she didn’t voice it so much, that it would be somewhat trying in some way that, you know, you’re trying to do something that you think is really important but the child can’t do it. So she was a little bit sad maybe. But sometimes things that are really hard to do are worth it more than things that are easy to do so as much as it was hard, there was an extra joy when you knew you got the child enough milk. Because there were quotas you had to… ‘Cause she wouldn’t have done it. That was the thing. She wouldn’t have drank the milk because she – like Sam was thirsty; he would like climb around looking for the breast, take it and drink as hard as he could, and squeeze it and make sure he was getting it. This child would have just let herself die and you had to make her live. And she wasn’t gaining weight, which was the hardest thing about it. So she wasn’t getting to a point where she could have the heart procedure because she wasn’t gaining the weight. So that was hard, you know. And so you do all the feeding and everything… Anyway, we took her in and she had the heart surgery early, so I think after a month or six weeks she was having the heart surgery, even though she hadn’t gotten to the weight. And that was hard. By then we were really worn out I would say. I felt like a new and different person. I felt like a father, but I also felt like I had this huge task at hand that wasn’t always rewarding. You know, it had its rewards, but you didn’t know what the end was going to look like. And there wasn’t always like… There was joy every day but you had to look for it, you know? It was hard. And I think at some point me and her mother weren’t having the same experience anymore. It was different for both of us.

How was it different, do you think?

I don’t know, but it was different. I don’t know. I can’t even speculate on it. But I think it definitely was different, like we were seeing… I mean in a lot of ways I feel like there are some things that me and her have that we understand that nobody else will understand, you know, like we’ve been through something together. And on that one
aspect of life we’re really…we do have this connection. But it was different. I think we both perceived the whole thing slightly differently. It meant different things, it hurt different ways, it was joyful in different ways, you know?

How did that affect your relationship with her?

I think I really wanted to escape from it. I think I did in some ways. I think we both, at times, really needed a break.

From each other?

From the work involved. It’s not like work where after you put in your eight hours you go to bed and it’s off your mind, you know?

Because it’s ongoing?

Yeah. There’s always this concern. Like, is your child going to live?

I can see how that could be really taxing.

Yeah. Yeah. You get really tired and start feeling really…thin, you know? Yeah, so at different times I feel like we would need a break, but the way to have a break would be like – I would take a break, and I knew she was with her mother and I knew she was being taken care of, but I needed a way out a little bit, from some of it, because it turned into months of like, where, you know. And so it was always like that, you know, you go to work and you see that your child is laying in bed with her mother and it’s like the best feeling in the world. And you feel like you can leave, because everything’s taken care of. And you feel like a father no matter where you are, and that’s great feeling, you know. But this was more like, you know they’re in good hands, but like… I mean, her mother’s good but the situation’s really hard. You kind of feel like even if you’re not there, you at work or doing something, you feel like you should be there. It’s hard like you feel like you should be in two places at once. I started to feel like I needed to be everywhere at once, and it was hard. And she recovered – he had the heart surgery and she started gaining weight. But it was still hard. It was tiring. And a year later she got other problems. It went on. She got leukemia. And she was in the hospital for like a year. Yeah, she had blood cancer, and went through that. And by then, me and her mother weren’t really together. We were but it was just like… The road was too hard to do it with somebody. It was better to have your… I don’t know. I mean, I was closed off from being a person who could be in a relationship other than for the child, you know.

Was that because you were giving so much of yourself already?

Yeah. And I started to feel like… I don’t know. I don’t know how I felt at that point. No, maybe that was later. I think we started to resent each other in some ways. Because the situation was hard. I couldn’t necessarily be enough for the situation. I could be, I
was good enough for the situation. I was what I was and I did the best I could, and
everything has worked out thus far. But there would be a way to see that maybe I wasn’t
enough and maybe that was what she was seeing, that maybe I wasn’t enough. Or no
matter what I could be it wouldn’t make the situation different. But I have to say I was
still happy to be a father, and still enjoyed all the first steps.

You mean, in spite of all the challenges?

Yeah, totally. I remember Thanksgiving when she walked for the first time. That was
like… she was born in February and by the next February she wasn’t walking. It
wouldn’t be until Thanksgiving so she must have been about eighteen months, but she
was taking her first steps and walking. And it was great, you know. It was really
exciting. And she… I guess things changed after she was in remission. I don’t know. There’s an interesting thing about being a father to a child that
you think there’s a good chance that you’ll outlive. You kind of know that going into it.
And I don’t think about it all the time but you don’t like any time to go by and not cherish
the time, you know?

I don’t want to be insensitive, but is that still the case? I mean is that still likely?

I don’t know…

Does she have health issues now?

Other than having a replaced heart and having had cancer in her body, no, I would say
not. But she has three pretty heavy strikes against her, maybe. No she’s okay now.
She’s in remission. I mean, you have better chances of getting cancer again. Someone
who’s had leukemia has a better chance of getting it.

You’ve already gone through this experience of chemotherapy and radiation…

Yeah, I have. There was a point where her white blood cell count was two. It was like a
pair of white blood cells. And seeing doctors trying to get an IV and like stabbing her,
over and over and over and over again and her screaming. There was tons of pain that
she went through. For years she didn’t feel comfortable with touch, because everyone
that was touching her was hurting her. She had hard times with that. I cuddle her and,
like, hold her now like she’s a two year-old because she’s willing to take it. I mean, she
wasn’t for years. She would cringe if you touched her sometimes. Yeah, so it was hard.
But I look at all the work I put into it and it was worth it. And it gives me a new
perspective about being a father. And I think it’s made me tougher on Sam. Sometimes
when he cries and screams when he doesn’t get what he wants, I feel like “you don’t even
know what you have.” If you could only know what someone else’s shoes were like.
Which of course, the two of them have nothing to do with each other, other than they’re
both my children and I’、“I’m looking at them both, you know. I’ve never said it, but
sometimes I think “Jenny’s had it twice as hard as you.” And he’s actually pretty
sensitive to the whole thing.
In what ways?

He doesn’t make fun of her. He looks out if people are. He tries to help her. Maybe more than he should he tries to tell her what to do. He goes from, like, “Hey can I help you?” to telling her what she should be doing. Actually, he always has the answers for her. I don’t know. It’s hard to… that’s the thing. What I’m coming to from talking about this. It’s hard, like, you’re asking me what is it like to be a father… There wasn’t time to reflect on it as it pertained to just me. Like sitting back and being like “Gee, being a father’s nice because of this. And I used to think this way about myself and now I think this way.” It was very focused around the child. The experience, I felt, was what she was going through. And I don’t know if I ever really got the experience for myself until way later. Once we were out of the heat of it and she had been in remission from leukemia for like, say six months or a year, and I could just lay there in bed and put her to sleep at night and just feel like everything’s good and say a blessing over her while she slept. And I started to feel that feeling, like devoid of any stress or looming doom or something like that.

So how old was she at this point?

Three.

So things were touch and go for basically the first three years?

Yeah.

And so it wasn’t even until she was three that you could really pause...

In reflection and joy, yeah.

That’s a long time.

Yeah. But it was well worth it I think. Which is very different from Sam. It was like that immediately. You know, the birth was at home. The birth was on our terms, for the most part. It felt like it. It was great, you know? It was a different experience.

Wow. That’s a pretty intense story.

Yeah. I haven’t told it in a long time.

So, let me ask you some questions. Maybe more abstract, now that you’ve told me the concrete details. The first one is really a broad sort of philosophical question. What does fatherhood mean to you? What does the concept mean to you?

Shit. We need another hour and a half I think. It means a lot to me. Like I said, I’ve never known my father. I’ve met him like twice. So father to me is more than this idea
of this heavenly father or something outside of a tangible father, like “oh I’ll look like that; that’s my place in the world.” I’ve never seen it that way. I’ve only recognized that recently. Fatherhood’s never had a face on it, like someone might have with their father. Maybe my grandfather, maybe some stepfathers, but it’s different from having a father to look at. So it’s always had... I mean I can imagine it being this way for other people too. But for me it’s always had this really spiritual kind of feeling. I feel like the world works like you have fathers, you have mothers, and you have children, and everything kind of flows around that. And being a good father is about the most important thing you can do, other than being a good husband. I mean, you have to be a good husband to be a good father. You should try your best to be both of those. And it’s one of the most important things you can do in life. To have and raise children. And what it’s about, I guess, I’m still figuring out. I’m still not quite sure exactly what it’s about. I know the feeling I had that something was missing in my life, maybe from not having a father, I guess I can learn what it’s about from that because I never really knew, until I had my son and I see how strong he is inside himself – he’s really secure in himself. And I know we have interactions all the time that help that, facilitate that. And I know he feels big inside himself and he stands on his ground and he also has questions. I mean, I can’t take credit for his personality, but I can sure take credit for providing the things that he needs to grow as a person the best way I can, you know. And I guess that’s part of it, it’s just being a good facilitator. I’ve heard people say that parenthood isn’t friendship, but I feel like I’m a friend to my child, like he can ask me a question and I don’t always have to give him the “father” answer; I can just talk to him about something, you know. Which, maybe that is... I don’t know. He’s kind of my best friend in some ways, you know? He always wants to hang out with me.

That feels good, doesn’t it?

Yeah. So like, you kind of have that. I’ve always kind of felt like I like community in my life. I like my friends and I like my family and I like to feel close. Usually I’ll have just a couple really close friends that I really trust. And that feels good to me, kind of like family.

You mentioned before that your father wasn’t around when you were growing up and so your original idea of a father, or at least how you reflect on it, may have been something more like God the father, a spiritual thing. So now, having had your own children and being father, has your experience of being a father changed your views on fatherhood?

Oh yeah. Definitely.

So now you have some idea of the role of the father. Did you have any other role models? Like male role models when you were growing up that gave you some ideas about being a man?

Not at key times, no. I had a stepfather that my mom divorced when I was twelve, and then he wasn’t my father anymore. And then she remarried when I was, like, twenty. So from the time I was like eleven or twelve until I was twenty I didn’t have a father in my
life. And I would think that’s an important time… Four and five and all that time when you’re young, I had my stepfather then. And he’s like my father now. We, after twelve years, got back into a relationship.

So you have a relationship with him now?

Oh yeah. He’s my sister’s father. Yeah. He’s like my father. What was your question again?

I was wondering if you had any other male role models that gave you some idea of what it meant to be a man or to be a father.

Somewhat. I had my grandfather, but he lived in Massachusetts so I didn’t see him all the time. I would stay with him sometimes in the summer for a month or two. But that wasn’t always. It was just when I was in high school I think, when I started getting into more trouble and my mom wanted to make sure I was somewhere safe for the summer when I wasn’t in school. So I’d stay with him and I loved it. I would stay up at his house and read books. Yeah. He definitely inspired me. He’d always pull you aside and give you the talks. I feel like I’m partially without an inheritance, not having a father. Like I know for my son, we talk about things, like “hey, when I’m older I’ll build a house, right? You’ll help me build a house.” And I’m like, “Yeah, I’ll help you build a house. I’ll help you get established. I’ll help you go to school. I’ll see to it that you’ll stand on your feet. I’ll help you and then you’ll help your children.” But no one was saying that to me. No one was saying that when I was four. In terms of a male role model, no one was saying that when I was sixteen or whenever. So I’ve realized that that’s part of being a father. Like, I know one day, we were walking along some train tracks. It was me and Carrie and Sam. We were like maybe fifty feet from the trains and he looked at Carrie and was like, “wow, those are great. I want to go play on them.” And he was like, “No you can’t play on the train tracks. You can’t see the trains.” And he was like, “I wouldn’t mind going over there and playing on the train tracks.” And he looked at me and was like, “oh okay, we can go over and look at them.” So we went over there and looked at them. But I feel like not growing up with a father I only got the one side sometimes. You know what I mean, like what the mother was going to do. And mothers aren’t willing to do as much without someone helping them. So they can conserve their energy.

Mother’s seem to have a different focus in which needs of the child they are going to address, I think. You know, mother is often the one who is characterized as being the one that maintains the nest and the security while the father is kind of saying, “come on, come on. Let’s go check out the world.”

Yeah, definitely. So I got more of one than the other. But I feel like I was missing that and I feel like I’m indulging in it now, with both of my children. And I’m kind of giving it back to myself. Yeah, I feel like I’m fathering myself in some ways. I don’t know if that’s fair to the child, but either way I’m doing it.
That’s an interesting observation. I don’t think you are alone in feeling that way.

Oh, you could do that even if you had a father.

Yeah, that’s the thing. It seems to me that, and this is really interesting that you bring that up, because a lot of the things I’ve been looking at in literature concerning fatherhood in history and especially in our culture, is that there really hasn’t been a well-defined place for fathers. So we become fathers, and we each had fathers or we didn’t have fathers, or we knew our father or we didn’t know our father or we had a surrogate father of one form or another. And all of these men in our lives gave us some clue as to what it meant. But at the same time, it’s really something that – you become a father and then you start discovering, through the process of being a father, what it means to be a father. It seems to me that that’s what you are describing as well. It’s kind of scary and exciting at the same time.

Yeah.

I wonder if it’s at all like that for mothers.

It seems more linear for women.

Do you mean from generation to generation?

Yeah. I mean, for the most part women… Like, I look at Carrie and Hanna, and both of them didn’t have fathers that were around so much, as a positive role model. But both their mothers were, and I think they both took a lot from their mothers. And their mothers had these like super roles as being the sole provider. And I think in some ways it’s interesting because then I picked women like them and my mother was like that. And so sometimes in both relationships it’s been women that aren’t necessarily sure where I fit as being a father. And I’m not sure either, so I guess it takes a little more work.

You said you “picked” women like that. So why do you suppose you would have? What motivated you to pick...

Well maybe I don’t pick the women in my life so much as they pick me. I think that women who don’t have positive father models like me more than one’s who did have positive ones. [laughing] I hate to say that about myself, but I think it’s true.

That’s interesting. I can imagine that, given that you have your background, and your partner has her background – both of your partners had similar backgrounds where you described this marked absence of a clear and determined father figure, that it would be safer for you to explore what it means to be a father with somebody who doesn’t already have an idea.

Oh yeah, totally! In both of them my exploration was great. I feel it’s one of the most important things I’ve done, being a father.
I feel like you’ve answered all of my questions. The only thing I would ask you now is whether you have anything to add that we didn’t address already.

I think it’s really important to be a good father. I think it’s important as a nation to get on the ball and have a consensus a little bit about what it means to be a father. I mean, I don’t want to say that everyone should have the same answer, but it would be nice to… I don’t know, bounce ideas off people.

So in other words, for fathers to start communicating?

Yeah, I think so. I think it’s important to raise up children that have been fathered well. I think we’re suffering to some degree – whether there’s a father in the house or not – I have friends who grew up with a father in their house their whole lives who still felt fatherless, for whatever reasons. Maybe because their mothers told them they were.
Appendix G: Conversation With Charlie

So, first of all, let me ask you, what does fatherhood mean to you?

Well, I don’t know exactly – what it means. I mean, I’m a dad and I’m doing what my dad did for me – or tried to anyway.

What did your dad do for you – that was specific to your dad? In other words, what was it that characterizes your dad’s participation as a parent that your mom didn’t do for you? What did your dad provide for you?

He, well probably, instilled logic into my head more than anything else. I mean he’s so analytical and logical about everything that… I mean he… I don’t know – He’s never been super emotional but he’s not withdrawn either at the same time. He’s just more logic-driven, you know? Which makes sense.

More so than your mother?

Oh yeah. I mean, my mom’s more emotional than my dad is by far. They both seem kind of stoic, but… I don’t know. You seem to question that, “more than your mom?”

(laughs)

Just out of curiosity. When you said that your dad is more logical I thought maybe you meant more logical than your mom.

Yeah. Well, not that she’s not logical, I mean just as far as looking at everything with logic in mind. I mean, that’s the first way he approaches anything at all. It’s like, “okay lets go from step A to step B and figure out how to do this right without taking too many wrong turns.”

How is that different from how your mom approaches a situation?

Um, more like throws out… like if you come to my mom with a problem it’s more like she would throw out random ideas to try to fix it, rather than sit back and think about it for a second and say, “oh, this is what you should do is this, this, this, and this.” Instead it’s more like just try to solve something on the… I don’t know how to explain it. It’s more like a one-step type of… Like if this is wrong do this. If you come home with a cut, you go get in the car to get ready to go to the emergency room. Whereas my dad would be like, “well, let’s go see if you need to go to the emergency room or not. Let’s make sure it makes sense to even waste time to drive down there.” Whereas my mom would be like, “get in the car, I’ll go get my purse.”

Who were your male role models growing up, and what wisdom or knowledge did they impart to you in terms of what it means to be a father, or what it is a father does?
I don’t know. It’s so hard thinking about trying to figure out who my role models were as a kid. (laughingly) The Dukes of Hazzard.

What did the Dukes of Hazzard teach you about fatherhood?

(still laughing) Nothing about fatherhood! I don’t even know, just... I think probably my dad more than anyone else. That and just other friends of theirs or, you know, through church or whatever. Anytime other families that our family was friends with or something. You know, when I was growing up, my parents, of course, are still together, and I don’t think we really knew many people who were divorced, you know. There were no single parents or divorced, or stepparents or stuff like that, and I think that’s what a lot of it was. Not necessarily just as fatherhood in general, but just as family – the family being an important unit rather than something that’s just throw away. Because half the people anymore today seem to take it as a, “well, we can try.” You know, and you’ve got all these kids from broken up families and stuff like that. It’s kinda... I don’t know.

So you feel that your parents showed you that it’s possible to keep a family together?

Yeah. Well, they definitely did. ‘Cause, I don’t know. So much anymore, I mean, luckily Ann’s the same way, I mean her parents were together until her dad died too. And so it’s like we both come from that and so it makes it a lot easier to, you know, realize that problems will pass. And it makes it a lot... It was one of the things that made us really think about, you know, having any more kids and stuff like that, is just that fact that if there are fights or arguments or stuff like that, still we are always trying to figure out how to solve them rather than, you know, “oh I don’t even know why we should be together,” and dadadadada. It’s like there are better ways around it than just getting pissed off.

Okay, let’s talk about the time leading up to the birth of your daughter. How did you and Ann prepare for the birth? And specifically how did you and Ann prepare for your presence and participation at the birth?

You’re talking just the final couple weeks, or...?

Well, throughout pregnancy.

For me it was weird, cause, you know, Matt I didn’t meet until he was three, so for one thing I was kind of freaked out about it, didn’t know what to expect. I never talked – I don’t even know if my dad was present during the births of any of us, ‘cause Stephen was born in ’78 and I don’t even know if it was a regular thing to do back then. So I never really talked to anybody who’d been there at the birth. So I was freaked out, but at the same time it wasn’t really real to me. Just through her whole pregnancy it was like she was pregnant but she was excited about it, and I was... I wasn’t not excited about it, but I wasn’t emotionally attached because I had never been... I had no idea what to expect and, I don’t know, for first time dad’s I don’t know if that’s a normal thing. I am
convinced that probably at least half of dads are that way – they’re like, it’s more real once the baby’s born, ’cause everything changed in that split second, you know. ‘Cause going up to her being born it was like, you know, I was excited, I was happy about it, but I didn’t really understand the ramifications of it. I didn’t understand the fact that you can instantly fall in love. Whereas a pregnant woman already is forming a bond and an attachment and falling in love with her child. And so I didn’t get it. And now she’s pregnant again and I’m way more excited now, because I know what’s coming. I’m also freaked out again, but in a different way, you know. I mean now it’s more financial and stuff like that. It’s like, “ohhh, we’re going to have another one.”” And in the same thought I’m excited we’re going to have another one – I can’t wait. I could deal without the pregnancy in the summertime, but at least I don’t actually have to go through it, I just have to witness it. But, yeah, as far as preparing for it, I wasn’t prepared, and she… Mostly, we were thinking more along the lines of trying to figure out names and stuff like that and I was trying to… I went to as many of her appointments as I could with her, you know. And I wanted to be part of it, but I didn’t really know how to be part of it. And so it was kind of like the feeling of tagging along – or not even tagging along so much. It’s more like when we were in high school and you had to go do something and I’d just go with because we were hanging out before and we’re going to hang out afterward and so, you know, just kind of go along with and hang out, but I didn’t feel like I was really involved. And like I said, I feel differently now because I understand more what is going on, you know, what’s really happening rather than just the fact that she’s pregnant, we’re going to have a baby, and then my part starts. But she was more excited than me with Shayla for sure.

Do you feel that it would have helped to have had some father, someone who had already been through it, to talk with about it?

Not really. I’m kind of independent about things like that anyway.

So you feel that having the direct experience...

That weighs a lot more than talk. For me, talking to other people about what it was like for them… It’s like, yeah, but that was their experience. And, you know, everyone’s going to tell you something different. I know a couple of guys that are parents that don’t even really want to be. It’s like their wives got pregnant, so they became dads. So you talk to someone like that and you talk to somebody who loves being a dad and you talk to, you know, as many people as you talk to you’re going to get different bits of advice and different, you know. And throw it all together and you come back to the conclusion that you’re basically going through your own experience so really it’s not going to help. I mean really the only thing I probably could have gotten help with by talking with people is them maybe telling me, “well, you’re probably going to be in the hospital for two days, so be ready for that.” You know, but other than that, nothing really. I wish I had known that. ‘Cause the baby was born really quick but they kept us in the hospital. They didn’t want to let us go for 18, what was it, 22 hours after she was born before they finally released us. She was born in the morning and they could have let us go that
evening but they were like, “no, why don’t you stay another night.” But we just wanted to go home. It sucked, like being stuck in a hotel room.

What were you expectations about being at your daughter’s birth?

I didn’t know what to expect. That’s why I was kind of freaked out. I didn’t know… I mean you see those baby story shows or whatever and they have the dad come out and help catch or cut the umbilical cord and stuff like that, and I was like, “that’s kind of weird, I’m not a doctor.” You know, I wanted to be there, but at the same time, I had no idea what to expect and I wouldn’t call it nervousness as much as general discomfort. I wasn’t comfortable being in there because to me, the way I saw it before it happened it was kind of like being in the bathroom while someone’s going to the bathroom. And it’s like, isn’t that a private moment? Isn’t that kind of, you know, you’ve got everything hanging out, and so I felt kind of uncomfortable about it because I would expect her to feel uncomfortable about it. And she told me, “oh, once your at that point you wouldn’t care if a freakin’ circus came through the room.” She said it wouldn’t matter.

Well, given that, what did you feel other people, including Ann, expected of you at the birth?

I didn’t know that either. I didn’t know what the… I mean, Ann just said, “yeah, I want you to be there.” And as far as – you know, we did it in the hospital and…let me think. As far as what other people expected me to do it was kind of to keep getting whatever she wanted. If she wanted more ice, grab her more ice. If she wanted a washcloth, put a washcloth on her head. You know, and the nurses kept trying to push me out of the way and Ann kept saying, “stay here,” and so I’d stay there and the nurses were having to work around me. They were getting irritated, I could tell, but, you know, screw them. It’s not about them. You know, it’s not like she had a difficult labor or anything like that. It wasn’t an emergency situation, so they could walk around me. It’s not about them. I was pissed when they were doing that, and Ann was getting pissed too.

You felt like the hospital staff wasn’t –

Yeah. The hospital staff, some of them were really cool and some of them really weren’t, you know? And they were annoyed that I was standing there right in their way. Ann was saying, “Don’t leave. Stay right there.” So I’m gonna stay right there.

Did anybody give you any kind of warnings or comments or advice about what to expect during the birth? You already mentioned that people told you to expect being stuck in the hospital for a couple of days.

Well that’s what - nobody did tell me that. [Nick – Oh.] That’s the one piece of advice that would have been pertinent. I wasn’t prepared for that! But no one really told me what to expect. I didn’t really ask anybody either, though. I figured I’d know when the time came what to do, you know. That’s usually how things work in life anyways. You know, once you get there you figure out what it is you need to be doing there. And as far
as biological functions, I knew what to expect, but as far as any sort of emotions or anything like that, I didn’t know what to expect at all. I was more hoping, you know? Because, it was like I said. On the way… The whole time she was pregnant I didn’t really – I wasn’t there one hundred percent. I didn’t know what to expect, and the whole time I was hoping, you know… I mean, I was pretty sure, but at the same time, I’d have doubts. It was like, “What if I’m not meant to be a dad? What if I don’t fall in love with this kid?” You know? Because I’ve been around other people’s babies that annoyed the crap out of me, and it was like, “what if I’m just that way?” So to me it was more a fear of that than anything else.

Fear that you wouldn’t bond with your baby?

Yeah. And it was just kind of fleeting moments of fear. For the most part I was pretty sure that it would happen when it happened, you know? But I’d have moments of doubt when I’d go, “oh man, I hope I didn’t screw up.” But as far as the expectation of, of… I think it was more hopes and expectations of what it would be like actually being there at the moment of her birth than it was, uh, what’s the word I’m looking for? Instead of “what do I expect?” as far as what’s going to happen, it was more like expectations of what is going to happen emotionally, but I just wasn’t sure… You know, until it happened I really had no idea. I mean, that’s the one thing people did tell me as far as advice, that I had talked to. It was, “well, it will change your life.” And me being me of course, my first thought on that was, “of course it’s going to change my life. I’m gonna have a baby to take care of.” I wasn’t getting, “it’ll change your life all of a sudden – this is gonna be the most important thing in your life.” I was thinking more along the lines of, “yeah it’s gonna change my life. I’m gonna have to change diapers, I’m not gonna sleep for six months. It’s gonna change my whole freakin’ life.” You know? I mean, going up to it I had a lot of that, you know? So I think my expectations were way lower than what actually ended up happening.

So you feel that your actual experience was – when you say lower do you mean that you were expecting it to be less profound?

YES. That’s exactly what I mean.

One of the fears that you talk about, or one of your concerns, was that you wouldn’t connect with your baby, or that you wouldn’t feel this immediate love. Did you have any other fears about the birth? And if so, what were they?

Yeah, that I’d get grossed out.

Say more about that.

Just the idea of it. I mean, I’ve seen pictures of it before and even still in retrospect, thinking about it, it’s weird to me that it’s not disgusting, because just on a basic level it should be. I mean, this bloody thing comes out and it’s… You know, when I cut the
umbilical cord, blood shot up in my face and got all over my glasses and it wasn’t even
the first thought in my head you know, “eew, gross.”

What was the thought that went through your mind when blood shot all over your
glasses?

I don’t even know. I can’t explain what the thought was, I mean I was aware that it
happened and I thought it was funny and I was crying and laughing at the same time, I
mean I didn’t, I don’t know. It’s just that overflowing of emotion where you can’t really
even put it into words in the least little bit. I just know it was just phenomenal. And I
was aware, I mean it’s just like in an accident situation or something like that, where
everything is in slow motion and you’re vividly aware of everything that happened. It
was kind of like that. I mean I can almost, in retrospect, see it in slow motion coming up
and splattering on my face, and my reaction to it was… laughter. I thought it was funny,
but I don’t even really know if I was thinking it was funny or if that was just my reaction
to it. Just because I was so overwhelmed with emotion that that’s just what ended up
coming out. And then I thought back on it about a minute later and I just started laughing
again. It just struck me as funny. But, I don’t know, just as far as the base function of it,
it should be kind of… I mean, I don’t have a queasy stomach or anything but, you know,
I wouldn’t want to sit there and watch an operation taking place or anything like that.
And it’s similar in that there’s blood and screaming, there’s pain, there’s all this mess,
and just as far as I was, I guess on some level, expecting that I would want to leave the
room and not be there because all this was going on and I would not want to see it or
something. But I don’t know if grossed out is the right word but I don’t even know what
the right word would be. Just that I’d rather not be there than be there, you know? That
it would just be unpleasant. I think that’s a better way to describe it than disgusting, but
just unpleasant.

And that wasn’t your experience?

No. Not in the least little bit. Not once I was there. But that was one of the things that I
thought might happen.

Can you describe for me your experience of being at your daughter’s birth? You’ve
touched on a lot already, but maybe just as a kind of narrative you could tell me what
your experience was of being there when your baby was born. Start as early on as you
like.

Probably about the time that her epidural wore off, because the doctor had screwed it up.
It wore completely off. And then it started getting frantic all of a sudden because the
nurse was saying, “aw, we’ve got plenty of time. There’s going to be another couple
hours or so, so we can get the anesthesiologist back down here” and dadadadada. And
Ann’s like, “uh uh, I’ve got to push, I’ve got to push.” And the nurse is going, “No. You
can’t push. You’ve got plenty of time.” And then she gets on the phone and she calls the
guy back down to do the epidural again.
The anesthesiologist?

Yeah, the anesthesiologist. And she gets off the phone with her and Ann’s like, “I have to push.” She’s like, “This is happening now.” And the nurse was like, “No it’s not. I’ve done this a thousand times. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” And then she just checks, you know, just to kind of patronize her. And she goes and checks and then – she was on the little wheelie-stoolie thing – and she shoves it back over towards the phone and she says, “Get Dr. Murphy in here. This baby’s coming now! Call up and cancel the anesthesiologist.” And I mean she was just in shock and all of a sudden it’s just chaos in there. And that’s when, you know, nurses are starting to get annoyed that I’m right there and – this all took place in probably a grand total of, from the time that Ann first said that it’s happening now, I need to push, and the nurses telling her she still had a couple of hours, maybe a grand total of five, maybe eight minutes, till the doctor got there. And that whole time she was saying, “oh, I need a washcloth, I need this,” and the nurses are all trying to get me out of the way ‘cause they’re all panicking all of a sudden because they can’t believe how fast she went from a nice smooth labor into “okay, now the baby’s coming.” So they’re running around frantic, and Ann’s wanting me to keep a cool washcloth – either cool or hot washcloth – on her head, I can’t remember which, probably cool. Then the doctor came in and he kind of calmed people down. I think he was kind of annoyed that people were running around like crazy in there. And then I went over to the other side, and they said, “okay, dad, you hold this leg.” And it was just like all of a sudden, real quick then – probably one contraction that she pushed, and then the next contraction the doctor said, “yeah dad, you come down here and come take a look,” or whatever, and I look. And all of a sudden I see the head crowning and at first I was like, “what is that? It looks like an alien skull or something.” Because it was the back of the head so you don’t know exactly what you’re seeing, and the head comes down and it just looks so weird! I was like, “What in the world?!?” That thought shot through my head. I was like, “Huh?!?” And then they said, they were telling her to keep pushing and she was like, “I can’t.” And he said – this was on the second contraction that she was allowed to push – he said, “one more good push and you’re done.” So she goes [makes a loud pushing sound] and all of a sudden – and I mean [snaps his fingers] it was like that – because I’ve seen other birth on “Baby Story” or whatever documentaries and stuff like that, sometimes it takes a couple contractions to get the baby all the way out. Shayla was like [makes a “pop” sound]. Just shot out – one push. And all of a sudden this little thing stretched out and unfolded into a baby – and it was all of a sudden! Seriously! And that is the exact second that everything just became overwhelming. I just started crying, I couldn’t believe it. It was like… And that’s where I can’t explain. You know? In the least little bit, I can’t explain how I was feeling. I hope that I’m lucky enough to have that exact feeling again sometime in my life. Just that one absolute wonder, astonishment, awe, everything, all at once, and your just overflowing all of a sudden. And it’s like in that very second, it was real. And it wasn’t until then. And that’s… you know, I feel bad about that – you know, about the fact that it wasn’t real to me when she was pregnant before, because she was wanting me to be excited about it and stuff, and I don’t know how to be excited about something unless I’m really excited about it – especially if someone knows you well. They can tell if you’re faking it. And then in that second I understood. It was the most absolutely amazing
thing to where… she crowned and I was thinking, “huh?” and then she shot out and there was a baby there and I was like, “wow.” And I remember a couple random thoughts that, for some reason, went through my head while all this was going on, and one was, “How did that happen?” Like, how did that thing that looked like the top of a bloody walnut or something all of a sudden just grow into a baby? That was one of the thoughts that went through my head. It was like, “This thing was this big just a second ago, and now it’s this big!” And the other was just the size of her. It was like, “wow! That was inside her.” Because all of a sudden she stretched our and she’s little, I mean she’s a baby, but bigger than you would expect could be inside… she was big when she was pregnant, but she didn’t look big enough to be carrying a baby around. I mean just in the – just a kind of abstract thought that went through my head. “How did it fit?” And I was thinking, “Was it curled up in there?” And if you look at pictures, obviously they sit curled up, pretty much in fetal position. These thoughts were going in my head – yeah, funny they call it the fetal position, right? And babies just know how to it that way. It’s just weird. These were the thoughts that went through my head. “How did that walnut just turn into a baby?” And, “how did she fit in there?”

You said that the moment she was born was the moment that it became real for you.

Yeah, the moment it became emotionally real. I mean, I knew it was real.

Intellectually?

Yeah. But emotionally, that is the second that it just became real. And that’s the second that I learned what absolute unconditional love at first second is, you know, all of a sudden.
First of all, how old is your son?

He was born in ’61, so that would make him 44.

And you were present at his birth?

Yes I was.

Okay. Well, before we talk about the birth, let me ask you a couple of general questions. First of all, what does fatherhood mean to you?

It might take me a bit to define that… I think it means that I have somehow carried on my family gene pool, which is a little ridiculous given that I very much feel a family gene pool with everyone alive on this planet. It doesn’t make much sense to say that does it? Personally, it was something I had wanted for a long time, because I was around thirty years old when our son was born. And I had really looked forward to this because I thought that I would be a really wonderful father. I had great expectations, most of which didn’t come to fruition.

Well what do you think is the role of the father?

The problem is that the only text I had to go by was Dr. Spock, which is mostly a medical reference. I had no training whatsoever, other than the training I got as a child, which was both good and bad. But I think my role was to first of all nurture him, give him a sense of what is this world about, what is life about, how do you deal with this in the most appropriate and intelligent way? And keeping the morals foremost, morals and honesty foremost as guidelines as to how I would raise this child.

You said that the models that you had provided both good and bad examples, or that your experience of other fathers, or of male adults in your life gave you both good and bad examples of fatherhood.

Yeah, within my own family. Of course the bad there was my mother, very bad. And my father, wishing very much… It was understood that my mother supported my brother and my father was supportive of me. I know it was a very peculiar circumstance, but… I think that my father as a role model for me didn’t come about until much later when I happened to go through two years of psychotherapy. Then I began to understand and I can reflect back now on how much he told me about himself, about life, about how to behave. I didn’t understand at the time – it wasn’t significant. I look back now and he gave me a volume of information. He was, however, hamstrung by what I think to be a very intelligent but vicious wife in my mother. There were things he was unable to do for me. For example, when my brother beat me my mother would come home and it was my fault. My father would come home and he had a difficult time defending me with my mother. So. I don’t know where that’s taking us, kind of around in circles.
That doesn’t matter. Were there any other important male role models when you were growing up that gave you some idea of what it meant to be a man other than your father?

I think my grandfather, oddly enough.

What did he teach you?

He was a towering inspiration in my life. He was also physically towering at 6’4”. He had been sheriff of Clatsop County, he had been police chief of Astoria. He’d been fire chief. He had fought… he was the first sheriff to survive in office as sheriff of that county. There were gunfights constantly and I know of at least two that he had in the official line of duty and he obviously live to old age. He won – he killed these people. And yet I don’t… I think of him in terms of a man who would stand up for not only his own life, but those of… other people’s lives as well, which was part of his official duty. But he would not allow rampant lawlessness. That was his job, but this was the image I had of him. And yet, I only knew him in old age. He still had that bearing about him, about what is good, what is bad. He made it very clear it wasn’t always black and white. I spent a great deal of time with him because my mother left me with him basically every summer. Which is a great joy to me. So there’s this gentleman side to him, this gentle side. For example, he married an immigrant woman, my grandmother, who could barely speak… she came over when she was thirteen, but she spoke very broken English. She always spoke in Swedish to her two sisters and thought that I didn’t understand, but I did. And he put one of his sisters-in-law through business school, which allowed her to go to work for the post office. In those days it was very difficult for a woman to get ahead at all. She had never married as her sister did not. So there was this sense of a man who stood for law and order, who was willing to stand up and put his life on the line to see that it was carried out. But at the same time he was kind and gentle and thoughtful. For example, he was the youngest of twelve children. He left home from Missouri at age sixteen, got a train out to Oregon – he was probably already 6’4” – to come out and fight Indians, which I reckon by dating to be about the time of the Modoc war. So then he got into the Yamhill valley and he was taken in by a Dr. Sylvan, who later named his son of all things, Sylvan. He, for example, told us that when he was a child the elders ate first and the children ate last. It was never the reverse of that but we always ate with the family. It was very important that he wanted certainly his own children and even his grandchildren, of which he had three, to be with the family, to be part of the family, to be nurtured by the family. His gentleness extended to such things as the way he treated his dog. He handfed old Babe, a little Boston terrier. And I saw him, and I choke when I think about this, I saw this great man who was so gentle, gentle with me. He was a night watchman in his latter years, alone in the wharfs of Astoria. And I was fortunate enough to go back a couple summers ago to the wharfs and walk around out there and I remember the smell of the flour that had spilled from sacks on the dock and he’d go to the time clock and punch the clock and how he would talk with me about his experiences in life as we went through the wharfs and he punched the time clock. He was the night watchman, and I didn’t always go with him. I would get up in the morning, and I loved to whistle, and I would wake up whistling. I was a very active child, and I would wake
up whistling and my grandmother would say, “Johnny, grandpa’s trying to sleep. Shhh. Be quiet a little bit. It’s alright.” She was also very gentle. And he never complained. He called me Whistlin’ John, and he really meant it in the kindest way. I think he probably loved to hear his little grandson in the morning wake him up to whistling, happy sounds. He was my real role model, more so than my father, whom I to this day adore. I absolutely adore my father, but he was under such constraint that I don’t think he could ever allow himself to come through directly – it was always indirect. Things I found out later that he told me. He told me some amazing things about his relationship with my mother and how it affected me, so that I could, in later life, put it together. And I think somehow I knew that would happen, but the most direct and obvious influence on me as a role model was my grandfather.

Skip ahead to when you and your wife are expecting your first child. Put yourself in the mindset of the expectant papa. How did you and your wife prepare during the pregnancy?

Well first of all have to tell you that I wanted to name him Elephant Garner because he took so long to get there – her fallopian tube was plugged and she took an [???] which is blowing pressure though the fallopian tubes to open her up and she got pregnant. And I was in dental school at the time and it was a very intense part of my life and there was always a concern that I was going to make it through this ordeal. And being dyslexic I think it made it even more difficult because I could never read a textbook. I had to pick people’s brains to get information. That’s the only way I got information. So when he came I was just ecstatic. I can remember my father and my mother both just being - this was there only grandchild ever – also sharing in this. And we attended some classes given by a doctor who later became the Dr. Spock of his time. He kind of rewrote the book on childcare. For example, one of the amusing things he said was that in Oregon one of the things you could expect was that at some time your child would have worms. And everybody sort of looked at each other… There was a time when our son was scratching his rear end and I did just exactly as he had described it – got up really late at night because that was the only time when these things would come out, and spread the cheeks on my little son and here I found worms in his butt hole, and we go that treated. But his approach to children was quite different than Spock’s and I would have to say far more learned. He was an incredibly humorous man, he had a great sense of humor. But in terms of technical preparation that was the way that went. I was allowed to go into the delivery room, but I had to scrub. And I knew how to scrub from dental school because I had to scrub to do oral surgery. I’m getting off the subject – that was not part of our preparation.

We did things like, ah, we found a basket weaver – a very old man in Portland, who wove baskets – and he was probably the last who was really good at that. Wicker, wickerwork chairs, that kind of thing. So we had constructed a bassinet that was absolutely gorgeous. And everybody sort of looked at each other… There was a time when our son was scratching his rear end and I did just exactly as he had described it – got up really late at night because that was the only time when these things would come out, and spread the cheeks on my little son and here I found worms in his butt hole, and we go that treated. But his approach to children was quite different than Spock’s and I would have to say far more learned. He was an incredibly humorous man, he had a great sense of humor. But in terms of technical preparation that was the way that went. I was allowed to go into the delivery room, but I had to scrub. And I knew how to scrub from dental school because I had to scrub to do oral surgery. I’m getting off the subject – that was not part of our preparation.
claimed she couldn’t produce milk, which I don’t think was exactly true, but… And so I just had the sense that somehow I would manage all of this. That there wasn’t any – other than listening to Dr. Smith and buying Dr. Spock’s book, which I kept handy – there wasn’t really very much between us in terms of preparing for this child in the end because I was in the intensity of dental school.

What were you expectations? Did you have any thoughts, prior to the birth, about what it would be like and what you would be doing?

The expectations were, oddly enough, to the best of my recollection true to what actually happened. That I was certain for some reason that it would be a boy. I knew this would happen. And I wasn’t – I would have accepted a girl, I mean I love little girls. I have three girl granddaughters and I absolutely adore them all. And it wasn’t as though I had a particular preference. It was just that somehow I knew it would be a boy child. I don’t know how else I could answer that. Am I coming close to answering that at all?

Sure. Yes. I’m not looking for anything in particular. What about… What do you think was expected of you by others – your wife, the medical professionals, society? What did you perceive your role to be in other people’s eyes?

I think I actually went beyond what I perceived as my responsibilities, because I didn’t see that most fathers, for example my brother-in-law, my wife’s sister’s husband was absolutely not into it at all. He wanted nothing to do with the kids until they were old enough to wipe their own fannies. And I went way beyond that. The role I took was one of… my wife wasn’t performing as well as I thought she should. Feed him and clean him and bathe him – I did all of these things. I was almost a mother to this son. Am I answering you question? I went beyond what I thought that society was telling me I should do as a father. I love this role so much. You know, I almost had a true wish that I could have breastfed him. That’s how strongly I felt about this child.

That’s not the first time I’ve heard that.

Oh, really? I would have if I could.

What about… What did people say to you when they found out that you and your wife were expecting? Did people have advice, or give warnings, or make comments about what to expect?

No. Just expressing great joy. But nothing in the way of “do this” or “do that” that I recall. No advice. I later got to the point where I would ask advice of close friends on how to deal with various issues as he grew up but no, at the time, none that I can recall.

What about your presence at the birth specifically? I mean, this was in 1961?

Yeah. In 1961. I was working as a deputy sheriff at the time.
How many of your male friends... My understanding is that not a lot of fathers went to the birth back then.

Well, it was relatively uncommon. Robert Brown was our OB/GYN, the guy that delivered the child, and I wondered sometimes if he mightn’t have fathered the child because my wife was so in love with this guy. In fact she wanted to name him Robert, though that didn’t happen. Where am I going with this? I felt that I was probably allowed to go in to the delivery because of my being a dental health student and being involved in health care. In those days, oddly enough, medical people were very, very condescending to such as dental students. I never got a medical bill for years. All my medical was free. But I was also asked to experiment various drugs. For example, I was given ergotamine. I had no idea what it was. As a student they expected I would do these kind of things. And that happened from time to time. But I think I was allowed in because of this somewhat associated medical background. And the child was taken cesarean after almost 24 hours of labor. Why he couldn’t have determined by her small pelvis that it should have happened earlier I don’t know. And it resulted in what I think, later on... the pediatrician felt that possibly, because of this long period of delivery that would have culminated in death had not the cesarean been done, resulted in a lack of oxygen that later caused him to have problems, because he was in fact hyperactive. He was bouncing off the walls – and treated with dextroamphetamine, which I resisted. So, a very emotional thing when I saw that child coming out. He came out butt-first. I thought to myself at the time, “I hope he doesn’t go through life that way,” but he did for a while certainly. Screaming at the top of his lungs. You know, I whispered to him, “give ‘em hell, son.” Which he did.

Tell me more about your experience of witnessing the birth of your child.

It brought forth such strong emotions, I openly wept, sitting there on the little platform in the ring of seats around the surgical area. I broke up and balled my eyes out, and was allowed then to go off to the side where they, while they were suturing her back up again, to go close to him then, which was kind of unusual at that time. Nowadays it’s very much different in the delivery room. I mean nowadays I could have picked him up right away. But that was not allowed. But I was absolutely so joyous I wept. Loudly.

Did you have any concerns or fears about the birth?

Oh sure. I worried about, you know, the usual things. Ten fingers, ten toes. Did he have a cleft palate? And I knew a lot more because I had taken these courses that were basically medical courses. And I knew through embryology the possibility of defects. He looked like a perfectly healthy male child to me. He had a pretty good-sized wang on him and that pleased me. A blond, blue-eyed little baby.

Would you say... Well, let me think about how to word it. If you think about yourself prior to the birth of your son, and then yourself after the birth of your son, what sort of differences do you see?
Well, I think it just changed the focus of my life so dramatically. This son became everything to me. As he grew up I was... if I had to go to the store I would take him with me and proudly carry him around. It was, “oh what a cute little boy.” Yeah. He became really the focus of my life, absolutely. Everything revolved around him. I came home on night and he would run to me and I would pick him up and I whacked his head on the ceiling. I called the doctor of course in great seriousness and he said, “As long as you hit him in the head and not elsewhere he’s probably okay.” As I say Allen Smith had a great sense of humor. He’s now deceased by the way.

Was your wife... because it was a cesarean, was your wife unconscious for the birth?

Yes. Well, no, but she was so doped up she might as well have been totally out.

Did she have any memory of the birth?

Not really, no.

Did she ever comment about your presence at the birth?

No, not that I recall.

Have you talked with your son about it? Your son’s a father now?

No, I don’t believe I have. Hmm. And he just became a father himself for the first time. He has a stepdaughter, but only three years ago.

And was he at the birth?

You know, I don’t know. Isn’t that odd? I really don’t know. I have since been to the birth of my other grandchildren, albeit – what do you call them – step grandchildren? I was allowed to be there. Natural births, I might add. What an experience! I was so exhausted after giving birth to those two little boys. I had to go home and go to bed. You know I’d see that little head coming out. It’s a miraculous biologic thing that occurs. And with it, emotional for me to the extreme. Nothing quite... even the first act of sex with a woman was nothing compared to this.

Everybody that I’ve talked with - not just in terms of this dissertation, but just other fathers - everybody has said to me invariably that it was the single most transformative moment in their lives.

It chokes me now. I could burst into tears just thinking about it.

Even now.

Oh yeah. After forty years it just chokes me up to think about it. I have a picture, very clearly... I have, I think, a wonderfully distinct memory and I can play it back in
Technicolor. I’m there and I remember leaving the hospital, you know, with the baby in the little green Volkswagen and bringing home the baby, and the bassinet ready to go for him.

Well, I don’t really have any other questions, specifically. I think we’ve talked about most of the salient issues that I’m interested in, but is there anything else that sticks out for you that you want to talk about that I haven’t asked about?

Overall fatherhood into…?

Yeah.

Well, I think I may have mentioned before that my wife, I don’t know that I could ever give a diagnosis for her mental problems, but I think she really had mental problems. She came from a family of people who had, uh… Her mother, for example, had neuromuscular disease which wasn’t, as they’d thought for many years, multiple sclerosis, but Frederick’s Ataxia. She came from many children, oldest of eight, and in later age she became wheelchair bound with somatic muscle problems and unable to speak clearly, that type of thing. Now she’s in her seventies and going through Alzheimer’s, but I never felt like she was on this planet. She was a dreamer who was always a little girl and she would not… In later years she was angry that I had all these degrees and she had none and I told her, “You may go to college as I have said many times, any time you wish. There’s no reason you can’t. Any time. You could have any time. I made that clear from the beginning.” She wouldn’t do it. And she went into a very deep depression after the birth of this child, in fact to the extent that we were living in Portland and I took her to my parents’ home in Longview, which was then an hour drive, and commuted every day back to Portland, through the fog sometimes, so that she could be with my parents. And it was a struggle. For three months. Finally she brought herself around, and there were these episodes later in life and she was, uh… She spoiled the kid, I mean, I told you before that I felt that I had to – that it was my role to push the pendulum to more strictness with him. Well, of course she went to him rather than me, and that was… So I lost my close contact with him fairly early on because of my insistence that he see some discipline in his life. So he knew how to play us and he did and she became his favorite because she would give him anything he wanted, and still does to this day. Sad. So I didn’t feel that I was ever allowed to fulfill my role, and that I wasn’t clever enough to get around that somehow. And that saddens me that I should have had the wherewithal to overcome that obstacle that was so obvious to me, but did not.

You say that you were not able to fulfill your role. Which part of your role?

I wanted to be closer to him. And I wanted him – I think one of the things that I – I had great joy as a child making things and playing. My dad said to me that I was the happiest kid he ever saw. I was just a happy little kid. And my son was not. I would make him things that he really didn’t appreciate at all – a handmade leather marble bag, and just little things. He had the greatest room any little kid ever had, slot cars… I would make or
buy him anything I thought that he... that I would have loved to have when I was a kid. I
didn’t get these things. I grew up in the Depression and consequently, if I wanted a toy
my dad would take the jigsaw he’d made out of two sewing machines and he would cut it
out and I’d whittle it, so I made my own toys basically. But I couldn’t see the same
interest and that saddened me.

Do you feel that if you hadn’t been playing the role of the disciplinarian that you
wouldn’t have had that problem?

I’ve often wondered if he would have been different than he is if he would have felt
differently toward me. And now we’re fairly close, but we’ll never have that. That’s
gone. That’s the thing that I can’t recoup. So I don’t really know. I’m not going to go
on living out the rest of my life angry with myself for not having played my role
differently because I wasn’t certain how to play it, and no one knows. I did the best I
thought I could at the time, which was not a good excuse. So I don’t know the answer to
that. I only wish I had been smarter, more clever, maybe divorced her early on and took
the child away from her. For example later on, after he’d gotten out of high school he
was still with us and I’m saying – he was on drugs by then, I think cocaine, and I didn’t
know it. That’s how stupid I was. Not that I could have done anything about it. He
came home in handcuffs so many times I had to get my own handcuff key. I’m only half
joking about that. I’d say, “Well, we need to kick him out.” “Well we can’t.” I’d say,
“It’s time to kick him out. Sink or swim.” “But we can’t. He’ll sink.” And it went on
and on and on and it wasn’t until I’d left her that he went out on his own. He was forced
to then. So I suppose I have to
admit to regrets. There’s a lot of sadness with it. I’ve
talked about the joy of expectations and early on I could take control and realize a lot of
those expectations, but little by little I couldn’t any more and I feel great sadness in
retrospect.

You feel that your control…

I lost it. Oh yeah. I wouldn’t have wanted it to be control where I dictated every aspect
of everything that happened. Not that kind of control, but maybe more control of myself
than control over him or my wife. I lost it somewhere along the line.

And now you’re closer?

Closer. Yeah, I think he and his wife are… Talking about role models for his
stepdaughter, he and his wife still cuddle. This is one of the strongest marriages I’ve ever
seen. They rejoice in one another. And I think they’ll go to their deathbed with that
feeling toward one another. And as far as role models, his daughter has seen this in them
and he hopes that when it comes time for her to get married that she’ll see how love plays
such a strong role and hope that she doesn’t make a mistake in her marriage. They’ll
probably, being Muslims, be intent on finding a husband for her, if you can believe it.
They were talking about a first cousin last night who we know is very fond of her and
vice-versa, and we advised he’d better speak to his family physician about that close a
relationship. First cousins are not cool, I think. He didn’t know that and I said, “Well,
find out before you arrange that kind of a marriage, in spite of the fact that they may fall in love.”
Appendix I: Conversation With Chad

First of all, let me ask you some demographic questions. Were you present at your first child’s birth?

Yes.

And how long ago was that?

Seven months, about. Give or take a week.

Ok. I want to ask you some general questions before we get to the birth specifically. First of all, what does fatherhood mean to you?

I guess it’s something… I mean, my father was somebody that was pretty steady, like, always there. Maybe not someone I could talk to all the time, but someone I knew would always have my back and always be there to protect me. I think that’s pretty much my guiding… Like what my father was to me. I guess a presence that was always comforting me, like a safety net kind of thing. So I guess that’s one core thing a father does.

He’s a lasting presence?

Yeah, kind of a steady… Well, my dad never really went anywhere. He went to work and he came home, so he was always there to help me and just kind of bring me along. It wasn’t so much like a buddy relationship. I was more like a presence that I wasn’t worried about. You know? I knew I could try anything and whether I proved myself or failed miserably, it didn’t matter. So I would have this comfort of him being there. Does that answer that question? It’s a pretty large question.

It is a large question. Yeah, I think it’s clear and I can understand what you’re saying. Is there anything else?

I guess for me that’s the core thing. My father, to me, was also a male role model, but to me, fatherhood isn’t that, because I have two daughters and I’m gonna be a male role model to them but not necessarily something that they’ll model themselves after. Just, every man they see after me, they’re going to compare them to me. So I think that’s still kind of connected to my first thought – just being this rock. I don’t have to worry about where I am in the world. I always have this person who will take care of me if I need him.

Besides your father, did you have any other male role models? You know, men that you got some sort of understanding about what it meant to be a man and a father from?

Definitely not in a positive light. I have two really good friends from childhood that were… like, one father… I went to his house every day, practically, to play and never
saw his dad because he would be in watching fishing. He was never involved in anything we did, ever. And the other dad was an abusive-type father, so it was more like, “wow I have it pretty good,” you know? I think I was more influenced by everyone’s mom and my mom as far as outside my dad, you know? So, no. No positive reinforcement whatsoever.

But you definitely got a sense of what other men were capable of, in terms of… What not to do?

Yeah. I definitely saw it from… I guess it was like a fly in the room, watching father and on interact when I was a kid. It’s kind of a weird situation to be in. I mean, you’re outside of it and you’re not involved in the conversation or whatever argument is going on. You’re just observing. It’s kind of a disheartening thing sometimes, to think that people can be like that to their kids. It’s definitely… hmm. I’m trying to think of a positive role model I had as a kid – a male. But I can’t think of any. My grandfather was really overbearing and controlling, even to me. My father was a different apple from the rest of them, you know? So seeing these other fathers has molded what I think of as fatherhood, as being a father, definitely. But it’s definitely more a kind of “what not to do” thing than “what to do,” you know. I still had to figure out a lot of things of what to do, as right. My father definitely has his ways and views and stuff, but he was, outside of those things… Those were outside, like person-to-person differences than father-to-son differences. I think that we meshed pretty well that way.

Do you feel that you learned a good way of fathering from your father?

Yeah. I mean, he definitely reared his ugly head once in a while, but whether that’s right or wrong, I won’t… I might say it’s wrong, but it definitely showed me certain things, aspects of his personality and I guess… Just growing up to be a person, too. How to deal with certain situations. And I decided not to do those things either. But I picked and chose when he would have his moments because he would never let his anger get the best of him until it was too late and then it was an explosion. But it was never physical. He would just yell and get kind of red. So yeah. We’re definitely different people, but I think that if I follow his… I don’t know, fatherhood model that he did, it wouldn’t be half bad, you know?

I should state that if any of my questions make you feel uncomfortable, you should feel free to say so and we can move on. (Okay) Let’s talk more about the birth, and your presence at the birth. You said you have two daughters. And you were present at…

Jill.

Okay.

Cassie is not my biological child. When I started going out with Allison, she was 10 or 11 months old already.
Oh, okay. So you’ve been a dad for… How old is Cassie?

For three years, yeah. Before Jill. Pretty much… Well, two years.

Let’s talk about the time leading up to the birth.

Okay.

How did you and Allison prepare for the birth?

As far as conception-wise?

Well, once you found out you were going to have a baby. What sort of things did you do or talk about together?

Well, we decided to do… We read a couple books and magazines about different birthing methods – the dos and don’t kind of thing. And we took Bradley method classes, which was a very… They call it partner-, or husband-, coached birthing. And that was a twelve-week course, so it was pretty long. And we discussed everything from episiotomies and the actual physical things that happen into giving birth and the emotional roller coaster from the hormones that women go through. And we were reading pretty much every night in bed. I researched things and told her, and she would give me things. So as far as… On both sides it was an active learning process. I mean, I wasn’t there for Cassie’s birth so I didn’t know a whole lot about what happens in the room, you know? But I had made the choice that I was going to be there. It just doesn’t seem… I mean, Allison is carrying this baby for nine months, it’s the least I could do to help her get the thing out, you know. So it didn’t even occur to me to not be in the room. So there was so much that I had to learn and read and feel Allison’s body and figure out how things are situated so I could be prepared for that. It’s such a huge undertaking.

So you were both involved pretty actively for the duration of the pregnancy, in terms of educating yourselves and each other?

Yeah. I mean, there are so many boring books about birthing, it’s hard sometimes to not lose interest, you know? But yeah, we were really active, I think. As far as getting the right… Making sure we were on the same page at every step. Like, when the day came, as far as about drugs, and episiotomies, and alternatives to certain things that would make it easier for Allison, and all those things. We had a midwife. We went through Penny Thomas who’s awesome. She definitely made it feel like… She’s the midwife for Allison, but she’s like my midwife too, you know? So we could talk too about these things. Like what we’re doing now. I could sit down with her and discuss these things. It wasn’t so much like, “all these things are happening to Allison.” We could talk like it was happening to both of us. So it was really nice to be able to pass these ideas between the three of us and keep everybody on the same page about things.
And how did that feel to you? You know, being involved in the process?

I felt like I was a father already, you know? So that’s part of being a father – making sure your kid is safe and everything. I wanted to make sure that the fetus is growing, so I wanted to know what was going on there, and... I mean I don’t have too much control over what going on, but what I do, I should have the knowledge and whatnot to do it. That whole time, you’re already a father, literally, once the cells start splitting, you know. It’s already started. Not at the birth do you become a father, you know? At least to me. I know it’s a mindset that already has started developing, you know? And since I already had Cassie I was already in a father kind of mindset, I guess, without having to start at the... I definitely had an advantage over a first-time dad for his kid... I already was in a father mode and helping along a toddler. So it wasn’t a big shift for me. I was already not going out. And I was already not sleeping very well. We already had a kid laying with us in the bed every night, so my comfort level was already gone. So it was definitely easier for me to make that shift. I felt like that’s what fathers do – make sure that they can provide everything they can. And at that point all you can really do is learn what’s going on and what’s going to come. There was not much I could do, physically, so much.

What did you feel were Allison’s expectations of you at the birth?

Well, we had, going through the classes we took... They were pretty explicit about what we were doing. We talked about what I’d be doing the whole time. I guess on the physical level I would be there massaging her and doing all the things we learned in the class. On the emotional level I guess it was that I was there with her the whole time, and sweating and crying and doing all the things she was doing. I mean, definitely not on the same scale, but I’m going through the emotions, too. I think... I don’t know if she expected that, but when we were there I think it made everything a lot easier. She is also coming from a different point of view because she already had a kid where there was no one there to help her. Well, her mom was there, but that’s a different relationship. So for her, probably, anything would be better. She didn’t have a bad birth or anything, it’s just that I think her expectations were that she knew that I was going to be there and she could rely on me to do those things, you know.

That’s kind of an echo of what you were saying in response to my question about what fatherhood is.

Yeah, I guess for me it’s the same. Being a friend, being a partner. It’s definitely an important aspect of it.

What were your expectations about being at the birth?

As much as I’d learned, I probably didn’t expect what I actually saw, what actually happened.
Do you mean what you learned in the Bradley classes and your reading?

Yeah. I mean, you can prepare a lot, but still it’s pretty eye opening when it actually happens. Like an out-of-body experience. But I guess my expectations of it were to be a pretty strong emotional event. The fathers I’ve talked to said pretty much the same thing that I went through. Just crying and happiness and fear, all mixed together, you know? And it’s like… it’s hard to explain. It’s like getting a tattoo – you can’t tell someone how it’s going to feel. I know that’s a terrible comparison, but there’s no way that you can explain how you’ll feel, and everyone has, I guess, a different experience of it. I expected myself to be pretty, I don’t know… A little scared, a little apprehensive about a lot of things, but I felt I was prepared with a lot of knowledge about what was going on. I knew all the different steps and stages of birth and I felt like that was already… that that was the easy part, you know? I just had to follow through with what we had talked about and the rest would just take care of itself.

Did you have any concerns, any particular fears?

Well, Jill was two weeks late, and after a couple days you’re like… Allison was starting to get nervous, like, ‘what’s going on?’ She had a little… she had scar tissue on her cervix so her cervix wasn’t dilating. It was effaced completely, but it wasn’t opening up. So you’re like, “it will come, it will come.” Then we were thinking about why this would happen and she was like, “maybe it’s this,” you know? And so after a week we were kind of more worried. But the birth was only three and a half hours long because she was completely effaced but she wasn’t dilated at all. Another one of the scary parts was that she had to go on Pitocin and take drugs to get the contractions going and that was something we had talked about and was a diversion from what we had talked about in the beginning. But it was one of those things that we were comfortable with. This is one of those things that came up that we were like, “okay if this happens then, yes, we’re okay with that.”

So you were already prepared for some contingencies?

Yeah, to a point. I knew, going into it… We had Penny, and she knew our birth plan and our philosophy about how we wanted to do it. But she warned us about the nurses in the hospital, so that was part of our mindset going in, was that, “yes I’m going to be here for Allison, but I also have to be like a security guard for her.” You know, to tell the nurses to get the hell out, or we’re not doing this. I had to be like a wall to make sure that their influence didn’t get into this. I mean, one of the first things the nurses said was that Allison was not going to be able to get through this without an epidural, like once she started the Pitocin. She said that right in front of Allison. She said, “Oh, you’re not going to be able to handle this.” Like there’s some sensitivity class they have to have at the hospital, you know? But she probably failed that test. I’m sure it wasn’t as bad as it could have been because we were going through a midwife instead of a doctor, like a gynecologist or whatever. But yeah, that was one of the worries – that the staff would somehow enforce their will and just do the garden-variety… Like pump you full of drugs and make you scream and do all these crazy things. That doesn’t make a birth go… I
mean, you’re already going to have a fast heart rate. You don’t need to be scared and screaming. If you can stay calm through it… It’s not like a surgery, it’s not an everyday occurrence. But since you’re in a hospital they can have all these rules and regulations. I don’t know. They act like it’s an appendectomy or something and it’s not. You don’t have to have all this equipment attached. Once we started to have these sorts of problems we had to have a constant baby monitor. Allison couldn’t get out of bed. While she was on the drugs to speed up the contractions they had to monitor her heart. And we didn’t really want that because she wanted to move around. It’s a lot about just making sure she was able to do all the things she wanted to do in this very strict hospital setting. And Magee Women’s Hospital was probably not as bad as it could have been. It’s weird to think that in a place that births probably a dozen babies a day that they are so impersonal and cold to families and kids.

It sounds a little like a baby factory.

Yeah, well that’s what Allison calls it, the baby factory. I guess if that’s what you do all day that kind of happens. I guess they have a different outlook on babies than we do. I had to kind of steel myself for that. So during the whole actual labor part of it I did have to hold back on a lot of stuff, you know. Just to make sure you’re doing everything right and make sure they’re not trying to interfere too much. And not get too upset or crazy in there.

Upset with the hospital staff?

Yeah, in front of Allison. And just disrupt the whole vibe of the place and make Allison nervous and me mad and we wouldn’t enjoy the whole moment. It was hard.

Would you say that those concerns were justified? I mean, did you encounter many difficulties with the staff?

Yeah, a couple. Like the one I said, and I think there were a couple other ones that just seemed weird. They have policies about checking the baby and taking the baby from you. I understand some of them, like you’re not allowed to walk around the place holding your baby, which seems ridiculous – they want you to put the baby down. So I’m like, fine, we just won’t leave our room. We’ll just stay in the room. And they are weird about the baby sleeping with you in the bed. They came in and were like, “oh, the baby’s supposed to be in there.” And we were like, “okay, we’re just laying here.” And as they leave you just go back to what you were doing. And taking the baby away to do tests – I just felt sometimes like I was chasing the baby. And also, everything was fine afterwards – Allison was fine and the baby was healthy. There were no problems whatsoever. But we had to stay in the hospital at least 24 hours. And you have to get two consents, one from Allison’s doctor and one from a pediatrician to make sure they can both leave. So we had to jump through hoops to spring us from jail, basically. They weren’t going to let us leave even though everything was fine. We had to have all these hoops to jump through, I guess. I was also going through… In the Bradley class they also talked about those kinds of things. They talked about those things because they
talked more about natural childbirth instead of drugs and the regular lay on your back and push kind of thing. So they pretty much prepared us for, “this isn’t what they’re used to. You don’t have to deal with them, but you need to make sure they know this is what you’re about and for the most part they’ll be alright.” And they were. They helped… Well, they didn’t help. I shouldn’t say that. They didn’t interfere with a lot… You know, when we were really doing our thing. It was all the little things that aggravate you. It seems like they don’t care, and maybe they don’t. I don’t know. I can’t believe that they can just have a baby factory and not see the emotions in the mother and the father and whoever else is there and that doesn’t have any effect on them. I don’t want to make nurses and staff sound like cold human beings, but sometimes it felt like that, you know? It was kind of an eye-opening thing, too, the whole birthing process.

Let’s talk about the birth itself. You’ve talked a little bit about it already. You said the labor took three and a half hours. Is that pushing time?

Yeah. We were there for a while because she had the complication of… she wasn’t dilating, so Pitocin started going in. Our midwife actually had to go in with… He had tried this before, with fingers or some kind of… anything he could find in the office in order to break open, basically, the cervix and that scar tissue. And he couldn’t do it. So we got there at nine in the morning. It was a scheduled thing because she wasn’t… She was having having contractions, but two weeks was the cutoff. She was having contractions the whole time, but nothing uncomfortable. So they actually had to go in. They had scissors or tong-like things they stuck in there and just kind of opened them up. Stainless steel things. And after that – I’m not sure how many hours we were there before that, but after that happened, from there to birth was, like, three hours. Her body was ready, A was ready, it just needed to… it was that holding us back. So everything came out pretty fast. She dilated real fast and the baby was born pretty quick. But we had a doula. A friend of ours, and she showed up and was talking to Allison and wiping her brow. And I was massaging her and was pretty much in the bed with her the whole time until she was actually pushing and the head started coming out. So I was helping her with different positions, just holding her and trying to help her do whatever she needed to do. Like I said, I was in the bed so I was pretty hot and sweaty. I guess that they had… The head started to show and we tried different sitting positions and the baby started to push. Allison had a mirror so she could actually see and feel the head too, and that was a pretty intense moment. And that definitely helped her too, because it was getting pretty tough. And she had cut off the Pitocin because, once we had gotten to the point where she felt she could push more we were like, “we don’t need the drug anymore so let’s cut it off.” That was another aspect where the staff was like, “well, you know you’re not going to be able to push this baby out without the drugs.” And we were like, “well, we want to try.” And they were like, “ok.” But they were resistant. Because it’s normal to keep the drugs through the whole thing. But we cut it off early than normal or something. So she was able to push the baby out. It was more difficult but it was definitely doable. It wasn’t that big a deal, as far as… She said afterwards that she could feel the difference - without the heavy contractions she could still push. That was a pretty weird moment, when the baby came out and was so white and doesn’t look like a baby yet. And they dried her off and she started to pink up a little bit. She was a pretty big baby too, because she had two
weeks extra to grow in there. It was until... I guess I was prepared for a smaller baby just
because that’s what I saw pictures of, you know? She was definitely not that. We didn’t
know the sex of the baby until then, and that was a pretty crazy moment too. Penny gave
me the baby and I was like, “oh, it’s a girl.” (pauses to weep) Give me a moment. Yeah
it was a pretty emotional moment.

You described it earlier as an out-of-body experience.

Yeah. I don’t know. It was like I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes. I was holding a
baby – Jill. And it didn’t feel real, you know? I guess I didn’t really think it was going
to happen. I know it’s there but… Like, until you hear the first heart beat you don’t
really believe it. You see this ultrasound and see the actual baby moving around and feel
it. As soon as she was born I got… I don’t know how to describe it. Just more… You
know, you realize that all this is real.

It’s amazing how powerful the experience is. I mean, it’s been seven months, and still
just thinking about it and talking about it can move you to tears. That’s powerful. It’s a
powerful experience and I’m amazed. I feel a little sad for all the dads who don’t get to
experience it. What effect, if any, do you think being there had on your relationship with
Jill?

It feels like… I feel like, because I did all the things I did – I was there the whole time
and not just during the birth but leading up to it too – I don’t know… I just think we have
that much better connection to each other. I don’t know if it affects my affection toward
her, because I couldn’t imagine not feeling this love toward my child, but maybe that is
why I feel such a connection to her, because I went through this with her, you know?
And was there when she took her first breath and puked for the first time, and did all that
nasty stuff that happens too. I feel like I’ll continue to be there for every step of the way.
And I was there also when it all started. So it feels more connected to another person,
this other human being that came into the world. Yeah. It’s a pretty strong, pretty
powerful emotion to have that, because you don’t really have that with anybody else
except maybe your mom. I hope she has a better connection to me because of that too,
but a lot goes into that too. I stay home with her every day. I think I can do more with
her and experience things at a greater level because I’ve been there from day one. It
makes every facial tick or whatever that much more recognizable and better.

So it deepens what’s already there?

It’s definitely a different connection than I have with Cassie. I mean, I don’t have a bad
relationship with her, and I don’t feel bad – I can’t really control that. And I still love
both of them the same, but I have different experiences with them. It makes that
relationship that much stronger I think. Just to be there for all of that. (pauses to weep)
Sorry about wasting all you tape.

Please don’t be. I think it’s great. I don’t know if you have had this experience too, but I
haven’t had too many opportunities to talk with other fathers about this. There’s not a
big forum for this kind of conversation. I think it opens up a can of worms that many men might be afraid to deal with, especially in the presence of other men. But I’m amazed at how emotional the experience is for all of the father’s I know. Every one of us that I’ve spoken with - myself included. So I think it’s great. And this project – for me it’s not just about getting some degree. It’s about discovering something about this phenomenon that I’m a part of and all these other men are part of, but we’re all like islands.

Yeah, I have very briefly touched on that even with my own… I can’t think of anybody else that I’ve talked to. I was watching something on television today about some hospital that was setting up a visitors’ room for family or whatever where people can come and be in the birth room with you. And two guys on there were talking about how they wouldn’t even want to be in the room and they were fine being out in the hallway, pacing around and I just can’t even understand that. It seems like too much posturing like they don’t want to confront this emotion. Like they don’t want to be there and they don’t want…

I would be curious to hear their reaction, even though they don’t want to be there, once the baby is born. To see if they felt differently.

I couldn’t imagine not being there and experiencing all that. I’m glad I did. I mean, I couldn’t prepare myself for the intensity of it, but I knew to a point that I would be experiencing something like this. And to be outside of the room, or just a token person in the room to watch is just hard to think of because it’s connecting with Jill but its also connecting with Allison. If I just would be sitting in the chair watching her struggle or do whatever she had to do it would seem like, “huh, this is your problem to deal with.” It just doesn’t seem right.

How did the birth impact your relationship with Allison?

I don’t know.

Or did it?

I don’t know if it made it stronger or not, because we already had a family situation already. We never really had just a dating period with two single people going out every once in a while and building up to this. She already had a kid. We went out a few times, but we also had the kid with us most of the time. And there was a lot of time, as we started seeing each other more, that I would be with the kid. So I think she already had a huge amount of trust in me. I don’t know if it got any stronger or weaker with the birth of Jill, but I think she feels more love between us because she can see it in my interactions with Jill. I guess it’s kind of the same for me too, when I see Allison nursing the baby or playing with the baby and that kind of… I know they have that bond too. It changes our relationship, I guess, because we have something more in common with each other than the peripheral things, music and whatever things people like. But we actually have something concrete in common with each other. So it’s on a different level and it makes the relationship stronger, not just personally, but subliminally or whatever. It just
feels different. Other than that it hasn’t really impacted our relationship too much, because of our situation prior.

You mean because you were already in a family mode?

Right. We couldn’t shift into that mode so it was… more just like parent… father daughter… I could see that part of her now. I knew she was a mother before, but now it’s a more real aspect of her. And it’s my child too, so we just share this bond between the three of us. I guess it’s a different kind of realization about how this family thing is supposed to work.

Do you feel that your feelings toward Cassie have changed since the birth of Jill? Or the way that you relate with her?

Probably. She was no longer the baby, you know? She was a big sister and now as a father I have to change modes with her. She needed to be… I mean, she’s not automatically going to be babysitting, but I needed to start different strategies with her to get her to do certain things with the baby or act certain ways around the baby. So as a father-daughter relationship it kind of changed a little bit that way. Just the way I interact with her and with the baby, try not to make her feel excluded or anything like that. But other than that, I think it might have brought us closer too, for the same reason I was saying about Allison because now she has a sister and I have a daughter that we both share. The two of us can enjoy what Jill does too, you know? We spend the days together, and when she gets out of kindergarten we pretty much play after school, the three of us. So it’s kind of a cool thing to get to be able to play with the baby but have Cassie there too, with us, and experiencing all those things with her as we go along. Jill’s seeing things for the first time and Cassie’s seeing things for the first time in that way, so it’s a completely different world for Cassie now too. I think it might help her along in understanding things because now she has to understand for Jill too. She’ll learn them from a different point of view now and have to explain them to a baby as Jill gets older. I mean, I’m not sure how that’s going to go, but… But yeah, I don’t think, other than that, our relationship has changed too much.

I don’t have any other specific questions, but at this point is there anything at all about being a dad that you want to talk about? Are there any issues that you would like to talk about that we haven’t addressed?

I think we’ve addressed them for the most part. I think the emotional part of it is kind of disconcerting to me as well, to think that fathers don’t have these kinds of emotions on this day of such an intense moment, you know? It’s kind of sad to think that they might miss something like that. I don’t doubt their love for their kids, but it seems like they’re definitely missing something when they’re not there for that.

What do you make of that? Why do you think that a man would not want to be there?
My guess is fear. Fear of what they might see or what they heard. Or just thinking they’re not being manly, or that it’s woman’s work. I mean that’s the ancient attitude but I still think it applies today. Like, “That’s my wife or girlfriend who’s giving birth and she’s the one who is pregnant.” They don’t think of it as both of them going through these things. And definitely partners… She’s carrying the brunt of it but it’s just like words like “we’re pregnant,” not “she’s pregnant.” I guess it’s just a mindset that some men are missing. And maybe when the baby’s brought out of the room they can be like, “oh yeah, that’s my baby. But we weren’t pregnant.” I just think it’s just a masculine attitude – what they view as being a man, not showing your emotion, or… It seems like they’re scared of confronting that part of them, you know? Or maybe they’re scared that they won’t have that reaction. When I heard a couple of people on television talking about it, it just dawned on me then that there are men that don’t experience that. I can’t imagine. And they were talking like they don’t even want to experience that. That doesn’t make any sense to me, you know? I was trying to figure it out, and I still haven’t really figured it out. I guess it’s mostly some kind of apprehension about, or wary about those kinds of emotions. I guess those men were just taught to hide everything. And crying is not an okay thing to do. It’s even hard for a lot of men to say “I love you.” So I think it’s just that men have put themselves, generation-by-generation, into these emotional straight jackets and just aren’t allowed to budge from these kinds of things. And it’s hard even for me to let these things out, but I did. I confronted that and allowed myself to go with the moment, you know? And it still affects me now, as I was telling you about it. So it’s sad to think that they’re not going to have that. It definitely carries weight seven months down the road. I don’t know how long this will last, but probably a while. You can interview me in another year and see if I still cry. I would suspect that men who had their first child thirty years ago had a completely different experience, just because of the way society was. It was unheard of, I would suspect, for men to go into the delivery room. You probably know better than I do.

There were cases in the ’70s about men handcuffing themselves to their wives’ hospital beds.

So they could stay in there?

Yes.

Oh wow! Just because the staff would push them out? So this is a pretty new phenomenon. Even fathers I know tell me “I didn’t know about these things, these techniques. Or what men are expected to do. I didn’t know what to do – what I can do, what I’m allowed to do.” This generation is the first generation to be in the room during the birth the whole time. It seems like there’s not much guidance about what you’re supposed to do if you don’t search it out on your own. And most men, I would suspect, don’t. So they’re just left out there. And I’m sure most men get through it just fine, but I guess it’s just a hard thing to understand. I mean, even going to the class it didn’t seem like I was going to be too well prepared… Like, I knew the stuff but once we got into that room, it was like, “I’m gonna have to do these things. I hope I don’t screw up.” There’s still a lot of apprehension about those things. But yeah, there was not any guidance from,
like, my father or other people. Like people who have done it four times – I didn’t talk to any of my uncles or my father or my grandfather. That would be unheard of, to talk to my grandfather about it, you know? So there wasn’t much I could glean from their experience.

It will be interesting to see thirty years down the road what this issue is like – if it even is an issue. And what birth looks like thirty years from now.

Yeah, we had talked about having the birth at home or at the birth center but we were restricted by Allison’s insurance. And actually, when her insurance changed halfway through the nine months, what’s that word, oh yeah – Pregnancy! We could see Penny for checkups but she couldn’t be our delivery person in the beginning, the first half. But once the insurance changed then she… So we had to balance that too. The insurance company definitely restricts a lot of what you can do.
References


Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Website:

[http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/fetaldeath/abfetal.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/fetaldeath/abfetal.htm)


