

## Carolyn McConnell

### ON FATHERS\*

**Father**, verb, 1. a. *transitive* To beget. b. *figurative* To originate, bring into existence; to be the author of (a doctrine, statement, etc.).

While motherhood is contorted with the weight of centuries of cultural expectations, American fatherhood at the end of the millennium is afflicted with a peculiar weightlessness. Our very language makes of fathering a singular, sexual act and validates through metaphor the preference of intellectual over biological offspring that our culture has been urging on men at least since Socrates in the *Symposium*. While theorists of “difference feminism” find in mothering the creative core of a system of values based on nurturing, fathering is left orphan by the collapse of old roles.

*Fathering Daughters*, a collection of essays by fathers, is redolent of loss, full of the suffering caused by the passing away of ways of life. Yet it is also full of hope. The essays suggest that change provides an opportunity to reimagine fatherhood and that reinvented relationships between fathers and daughters can narrow the rift between the sexes.

I am not sure whether I am qualified to judge this book. I am, of course, a daughter. Yet, raised as I was by my mother, I have always thought of myself first as my mother’s daughter. Creating a relationship with my father has been an unexpected gift for both of us, a thing made not given. But as I read this book, I saw how many of the authors, in the absence of received patterns adequate to their situations, had, like my father, to create new ways of relating as fathers to daughters.

The most moving essays in the book are those in which the authors bring the greatest imagination to their fathering. I wept as I read Adam Schwartz’ “Story for Ancient Moon” about his search for the story behind his Chinese adopted daughter’s abandonment, like so many baby girls, by her birth mother. When he finds a loving note tucked into the baby’s swaddling by her Chinese foster mother, he writes:

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\**Fathering Daughters: Reflections by Men*, edited by DeWitt Henry and James Alan McPherson, Beacon Press, 237 pages, 1998, \$24.00.

As the translator read this letter, I was holding Annie in my arms, my eyes damp with tears. I was crying, I think, because I realized we had come upon something very valuable for my daughter. She would have a personal and direct connection back to her homeland; she would have more than a certificate of abandonment to account her origins; she would know, without question, that she had been deeply loved before she was adopted.

He writes to the foster mother and asks that she always be a part of his daughter's life. When Schwartz discovers that his daughter's birth mother kept her for nearly five months, he treasures this as "a sliver of light, a small fragment of evidence that Annie's birth mother wanted desperately to keep her." He feels this mother always looking over his shoulder. This, he says, will be one of the stories he tells his daughter. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests, one meaning of fatherhood is ownership, and new technologies have made possible the purchase of offspring, so Schwartz' largeness of spirit, in trying to give his daughter an identity that went beyond anything he owned, is transcendent.

Several authors show how one endures with grace the unendurable; William Petersen's story of a final trip to Mexico with his dying daughter is heartrending without sentimentality, and Mark Pendergrast's quietly appalling "Daughters Lost" tells without bitterness of the loss of his daughters to recovered memories of sexual abuse that he denies ever doing. Less shocking but just as touching is Fred Viebahn's "Aviva's World," about his talented daughter, for whom, with his wife, the poet Rita Dove, he seems to have made of their German, American, black, and white heritage an embarrassment of riches. James Alan McPherson shows with what artful love a father can navigate fatherhood after divorce.

Even Bill Mayher's two-pager on building an igloo with his daughter is gently inspiring. It enriches the possibilities of what one can give to a daughter—how wonderful for a father to teach his daughter how to wield a chainsaw, even better for him to revel in "her easy competence in the out-of-doors." This small story of one day as a father and daughter joyfully work together offers hope that men and women might more often find easy companionship.

I find myself judging each essay by whether I would want the author as a father—I wanted to spend that day in the Maine woods with Mayher, envied the love and freedom and pride Viebahn lavished on his daughter—but this is

hardly an objective, aesthetic criterion. Yet truly necessary writing is difficult to approach merely aesthetically. So perhaps my response is appropriate. Anyone who is a daughter or a father to a daughter or who may someday be a father to a daughter—in short, most of us—needs this kind of writing now. Though the essays vary in their quality, these responses to fatherhood show how intellectual and biological offspring can inspire each other.