

Papa, PhD



Essays on Fatherhood by Men in the Academy

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RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY, AND LONDON

On Writing and Rearing

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We have two computers and three papers due.

My essay on nineteenth-century poetry is already weeks late. My daughter has to write five paragraphs responding to Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*. Her fifth-grade teacher wants to know, from "Sunrise" to "Cloudburst," what each movement makes her feel. My son has seven pages to cover the history of comedy, starting with *Lysistrata* and ending with *Seinfeld*. We have to marshal our time carefully.

Like a general sending battalions into battle, I pace from room to room checking the family's progress. "How many pages have you written?" "What is your argument?" "How many paragraphs since we last talked?" "Do you need to use the same phrase in three consecutive sentences?" On this rainy Sunday afternoon, I harass my children with questions, urging them to finish their work. My wife, whose profession involves unusual patience and listening, wisely escapes to the gym. By 3:00 P.M., the burdens of language, law, and patriarchy have left me very tense.

My own dissatisfactions loom over my children's prose. I have been staring at my notes since Friday, and my progress has been slow. For all the harangues about getting work done, about finishing those essays up, my sentences have been coming out as if they were the last smidgen of toothpaste in a meticulously rolled-up tube. As the rain comes down, I realize how central writing is to the man I have become—this father, professor, hypocrite.

When it comes to fatherhood, I am not a reflective practitioner, and I spend little time thinking about the different roles one can play in a child's life. Fatherhood, to me, is an unqualified commitment and an unexamined fact. It is making sure the lunches are ready, the carpools arranged, the schedules de-conflicted so we can attend the fifth-grade concert. It is keeping track of how long the kids are on the Internet and asking why the

browser always closes when a parent walks in the room. It is quizzing my daughter on electrical circuits and stumbling through geometry with my son.

To put it bluntly, fatherhood means little to me in terms of ceremony and myth. I am neither the diminished patriarch searching for his Promise Keepers nor the pious, introspective New Age dad. Being an academic has given me the flexibility to care for sick children, volunteer in classrooms, and prepare snacks after school, but the last parenting guide I picked up was *What to Expect: The Toddler Years*.

To the extent that these blessings have gone unexplored, I also recognize how much my experience of fatherhood has to do with writing, with articulation, with seeking the right words. In my neighborhood, some fathers have massive workshops and teach their children how to handle tools. Others have shrines to the New York Yankees and throw batting practice for hours after work. One neighbor has a music collection that lines his basement walls; he and his children jam on the instruments he has scattered about the room.

For better or worse, my daughter and son associate our relationship with language, with the delights of books, newspapers, magazines, lyrics, the repartee on television shows. My head can be halfway inside the dryer, my arm grasping at some elusive sock, and my son will stand directly behind me and begin to read a favorite passage from a book. How can I find this frustrating when he has seen me do relatively the same thing hundreds of times before?

I come by this mode of parenting naturally. I am an academic father whose father is an academic as well. My grandfather taught eighth-grade Latin and English in a small K-8 school. His sons sent letters home from college, and he promptly sent them back, each blunder carefully marked with an editor's red pencil. Retiring after more than twenty years as headmaster, he wrote a history of his town and a history of his school. He edited the town newsletter with my grandmother's help.

One summer vacation, my grandfather greeted my sisters and me at the New Jersey shore with the promise of a ten-dollar bill for each of us. For the next two weeks, every stylistic error we committed would result in a small fine—say, five cents for answering a question with "Yeah" or "Yup," ten for saying "How come?" rather than "Why?" I left with \$5.65. In the envelope containing the depleted cash, my grandmother had lovingly drawn a sinking ship, the targeted errors depicted as cargo falling to the ocean floor.

At the University of Pittsburgh, my father worked in the Cathedral of Learning, a Gothic Revival skyscraper forty-two stories high. With its vaulted archways, hidden alcoves, and cavernous common room, the Cathedral suggested that university life was profoundly old and mysterious, especially when its elaborate nationality rooms—Polish, Hungarian, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Russian among them—were beautifully decorated for the holiday season. The Gothic architecture provided an unusual setting for the burgeoning youth culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I remember being nine or ten and marveling at all the long-haired “hippies” who quietly studied amid the settled medieval gloom.

Several years later, my father allowed me to explore Pitt’s campus while he taught class. The university catalog often featured photographs of students talking or reading underneath the trees that lined the Cathedral lawn. I especially admired the pictures of students who managed to read while stretched on a branch six feet off the ground. Holding my copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, I scrambled into tree after tree, but each time I opened the book, I’d lose my balance and fall down. Eventually I wandered to the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial, a less bucolic setting, but one equally picturesque. I straddled one of the cannons that faced Fifth Avenue and several hours later happily finished the book. My reward for completing this rite of passage was that I walked like a cowboy for the next three days.

My most powerful memory of growing up in an academic household comes from the tenth grade. I was showing my dad a social studies paper. It was May, the windows were open, the room smelled like dogwood trees. As we talked in my parents’ bedroom, he slowly took his pencil through phrase after phrase, cutting unnecessary words, turning nouns into adjectives, eliminating clichés. I admired the improvements, his explanations even more. Within six months, however, my parents were divorcing; within a year my father was living in another state. I had little motivation to make such revisions myself.

It wasn’t until my sophomore year of college that this moment became meaningful. I had turned in an especially clotted history paper, and my professor asked to see me for tutorial work. Sitting in his office, he took his pencil through my sentences and showed me how to tighten phrase after phrase. He watched as I revised a paragraph he had mercifully left unmarked. The scene in the bedroom came rushing back, and I felt terrible shame.

Academia does not have the same mystery for my children as it did for me. My office is in a former dormitory rather than a towering cathedral.

The students who intrigued me in the 1970s helped de-formalize the academic world, opening campuses to children, the elderly, people of differing backgrounds and abilities. Perhaps because my children spend so much time at my college, they have come to regard it as their own. And in the contemporary version of fatherhood, my son and daughter are accustomed to seeing professional life occur inside the home. Work seems less an ancient paternal retreat than the silent activity between household chores. Syllabi, course proposals, student e-mails requesting help, these things are as common in my children’s lives as salad spinners and dish soap.

No one in my family has seen me teach, but everyone has seen me grade. Throughout their lives, my kids have observed the peculiar combination of adrenaline and dread with which I greet a stack of papers. I have graded in the hallways outside ballet lessons and in the stands of baseball and softball games. Over the years, I have learned to use my clipboard as a shield, warding off the parents who arrive at four-hour swim meets with nothing to read. I nod, I smile, I wave my clipboard, and in that gesture, I convey both territory and difference. *You’ve got your BlackBerry. I’ve got my grading. I am an academic dad.*

Sometimes my son or daughter will take an interest in my markings. They will read over my shoulder on an airplane or ask what all the comments mean. Once I found a master’s thesis on the marketing of *Harry Potter* poking from underneath the couch where my daughter had left it. As we talk about my comments, I am struck by how repetitive and yet difficult writing instruction is. Topic sentences, citing evidence, the use of subordinate clauses—my children and their classmates are already familiar with the concepts that they will spend their lives trying to master.

Unlike my grandfather, I don’t mark my students’ papers with red pencil, let alone the letters my son faxes home from camp. Having retired to the faculty after several generations as dean, my father soldiers on in his belief that he isn’t really doing his job if he isn’t vigorously amending each error his students make. Only when pressed for time will I write on my children’s essays, and even then, my marks tend to be a series of squiggles and question marks that indicate *Take another look*. We much prefer to sit in front of the computer together. I read the sentences out loud and ask how they can be improved. Inevitably the kids will get the phrasing right if they trust the fluency of conversation rather than the formality of the keyboard.

As an academic father, I have to resist the inclination to view my kids’ writing as an extension of myself. This detachment is hard enough with students; it can be nearly impossible with my kids. My father and grandfather

introduced me to a world in which writing and speaking well signified good character. That lesson—or perhaps it is a kind of faith—probably set me on course to become an English professor. After fifteen years of teaching, however, I have learned that writing doesn't convey character as much as it produces identity. The voice created on the page (or screen) has its own claim to reality, its own role in the writer's developing life. As the printer chirps with fresh new pages about Grofé and Larry David, it is a role that the editor in me must learn to respect.

Parenting, like writing, depends on the slow and iterative process of arranging values, words, and ideas into independent, synchronized beings. Call it the syntax of sons and daughters, the grammar of incipient selves. Writing may be an act of perpetual becoming, but like rambunctious kindergartners, we academic parents struggle to keep our hands to ourselves.

In his achingly perceptive poem "For Julia, in the Deep Water," John N. Morris describes watching his daughter learning how to swim. From the deep end, the parents watch the instructor steadily back away as Julia thrashes toward her. The girl screams for her mother, but the mother remains anxious in the distance, the place where the water is deeper and darker. "She is doing nothing," Morris writes. "She never did anything harder."

Such is the trial, such the blessing of academic fathers.

Doing Things with Words

IRA L. STRAUBER

As an academic, I am trained to do things with words. Indeed, that is an understatement: Perhaps I am an academic because the only work I can do is work with words. My self-identity is shaped by my reactions to my words, and to the words of others. In the dynamic between the two, at the end of each day, I ask myself how my words have performed on my behalf and how I have performed on their behalf. Most days, the self-report is not so good. Nevertheless, because I love the sound of my own words, as much as I let them down, I get an ineffable pleasure in persisting with the only tool I have.

As a parent, I have been trained to do things with words. These last words need some explaining. I am the middle, first male child of a German-Jewish father. That means that I am, as my older sister reported, an only child. My most vivid childhood memories are of a dinner table where the conversations were dominated by exchanges between my father and me: exchanges about school, about sports, about what I was reading, about what I was thinking, about me. Today this memory now makes me sad for my sister and departed younger brother; yet it does nothing to diminish my self-identity as a loved son whose reactions to the world were shaped by the dynamic between my father's words and mine. My father's words performed very well on my behalf, and as a parent it seems that I measure myself by how well my words perform on behalf of my daughter. Here too I get an ineffable pleasure in persisting with the only tool I have, even as my words inevitably let me down.

However, I am confident that my words as a parent have succeeded far better than my words as a "scholar." On either account, I am not being overly modest. I have had my share of academic accolade. But virtually every day, even, when, inevitably, my words as a parent have been less or worse than I would have liked, those words have been an ineffable pleasure.