

Unbecoming Behaviour ***One Woman's Story of Becoming*** ***a Non-Custodial Mother***

This is a story told with my personal rather than my academic voice. That is to say, I am sharing this story with the engaged and vulnerable voice of someone who has been a non-custodial mother—someone who made the decision to allow first one, then the other of her children live with their father. My story is not about becoming a mother but rather about *unbecoming* a mother. *Unbecoming* is the right word here as it aptly reflects the process and quality of my experience. The process of unbecoming involves moving from an authentic state of motherhood to a delegitimated category of non-mother. Some friends, family, colleagues and the courts viewed my “unbecoming” as inappropriate, improper, unseemly and not in keeping with accepted social standards expected of a responsible (female) parent. Thus, becoming a non-custodial mother came to feel like unbecoming behaviour—that movement into a state of childlessness that was regarded as socially shameful and offensive to moral sensibilities.

This is a story that I have left publicly unexplored until now.¹ Privately, however, I spent many hours examining this time in the lives of me and my children.² My story is about blood, sweat and tears—the blood of an intimate, biological connection between a mother and her two children; the sweat of my labour to maintain a strong physical and emotional presence in my children's life while struggling to preserve my emotional, physical and economic well-being; and the tears of grief and loss intensified by social isolation and the shame of being labelled a “bad” mother.³ Drawing on the wisdom and emotional distance that ten years can allow, I invite you now to hear what I have “hidden, swallowed, suffocated” (Fine 1992: xii). My hope is that sharing this story will help me recover, for myself and other non-custodial mothers, a legitimate public identity.

Blood—After almost seven years, my marriage to my first love ended. Our daughter was four and our son was three. The children and I moved to a small town close to the university I was attending and the hospital where I was able to find work as a nurse. For the next five years, we consolidated and strengthened our new family unit. Each year brought with it one or two modest victories. The children saw their dad every other weekend as regular as clockwork. The kids and I grew into a comfortable routine including a Thursday suppertime ritual complete with candles, “good dishes” and a special dinner of their choosing. After two years we moved from low income housing into a small brick bungalow like the one we had lived in the year my son was born. Both children graduated from pre-school to attend a public school within walking distance of our home. In year three, the children’s father remarried and the children developed a warm relationship with their “other mother” as my daughter dubbed her. In our fourth year, we celebrated the completion of my university degree. Subsequently, I accepted a new job with the faculty of nursing at a community college in another city.

It wasn’t long, however, before the kids and I began to feel the pressure of my job change. While I loved the work, the long daily commute robbed us of too many precious hours. After a few family conferences, we decided that moving would allow us to recapture time together for piano lessons, t-ball practices and quiet times. Excitedly, we made plans to move and build a house. Five years after we recreated our new family it seemed that things were falling nicely into place. But that was about to change.

Sweat—My son had always been the barometer of the emotional climate in the household. During the winter months that followed our move, he signalled a dramatic change in our household climate. Generally an active, funny and socially engaging child, my son was unhappy at school and home. He had become increasingly angry and sullen. Despite my most caring and diligent efforts I was unable to help him feel better about himself, his new school and our new home.

Our move which coincided with the move of their father and his wife increased the distance between our homes to about ninety minutes or a three-hour round trip on visiting weekends. My son missed his dad and desperately wanted to spend more time with him. Seeing his father every other weekend was no longer enough for our son. My every effort to facilitate a change in this routine was stymied. My ex-husband refused to renegotiate the visitation schedule for various reasons: the length of the commute; demands of a new marriage; his need to control me through the children; his anger with me for the dissolution of our marriage. So, the children continued to visit with their dad every two weeks.

My son saw me as omnipotent—the person who could make anything happen. The fact that I could not *make* his father visit more meant to him that I didn’t really *want* to make it happen. My son reacted against me in all the creative ways that a bright and angry nine-year old can. Over the course of about

six months our lives turned upside down.

I struggled unsuccessfully to respond to my son's increasing anger and sadness. He was in trouble and none of the people I consulted seemed able to help us. He began destroying property at home—his bedroom was a disaster. Our family doctor saw only an active, growing boy in need of more physical outlets for his energy. His grades plummeted. His teacher and the school counsellor recommended Ritalin so that he would be less disruptive in the classroom. He had no regard for his physical appearance, even showing up for classes one day wearing his pyjamas hidden beneath his snow suit. He struck out physically against me, his sister and his classmates. One day, after a particularly angry outburst, he dissolved into tears confessing that he wished he were dead. Immediately I arranged for the five of us including his father and stepmother to meet with a child psychologist. She gave me a tape on how to create a stable environment through consistent parenting and discipline. Her superficial assessment of the situation stunned me.

I felt abandoned by all the professionals that I believed could and should help us. No one but me seemed to hear the alarm bells my son was ringing. I didn't know where to turn next, seemingly powerless to stop my spirited boy from spinning into an angry young man. It was as if another being was inhabiting the body of the child I loved. My little bag of tricks and magic potions that every "good" mother stocks over time was empty.

Feeling raw and worn down, anger formed a layer over me. I was angry at my ex-husband for refusing to adjust his schedule to accommodate the needs of his children. I was angry with my son whose negative behaviour had become a daily performance. And I was angry with myself. Angry and heartsick that I wasn't the "good" mother I'd always expected to be. I felt inadequate—unable to refresh the internal resources necessary to respond to my children's needs.

There were days when I didn't like my son very much; when I didn't want to "do" this anymore. There were nights when I whispered these confessions to the bedroom ceiling—nights when I felt alone in the universe and too tired to face another day like the one that was ending. Horrified that I could even entertain such thoughts about the children I loved, I ignored or denied my feelings, further isolating myself from any help that may have been available to us.

Tears—One Friday evening after yet another long week of battling with my son, I asked him in exasperation, "What do you want?"

"I hate you and I hate this place. And I want to live with my dad," came the reply.

I called his father. "Please come and get your son. He wants to see you. ... I know its not your weekend to see him but he needs to see you. ... Why can't you make an exception this time? This is our son we're talking about! This isn't about you or me."

I detailed all the transgressions and outrageous acts our son had committed that week. "He's out of control and all he wants is to be with you. And I need

a time-out. I need a break. We both need a break from each other. Please help," I begged.

"Fine," came the answer. "But if I come to get him he's not just coming for the weekend. He's coming to stay for good. I won't have any of this going back and forth between homes whenever he decides he doesn't like the rules."

Exhausted, tired of arguing and feeling like I had no other options, I agreed. Besides, I thought, if living with his dad for a while would help our son get back on track, then this was a good decision. Furthermore, my head and my heart told me that this arrangement would be temporary. My ex-husband and his wife would realize that full-time parenting a pre-teen was more work than they'd bargained for. Over March break, my son would have his little vacation and I would have mine. Grinning and full of spirit, my son would return home with both of us ready to start fresh.

Three months later, the school year ended and my son was still living with his father. He was settling into his new home and his relationship with his father and stepmother. Happier and more grounded, he was doing better in school and making friends. While his sister continued to visit with her father, my son refused to visit with me or talk with me by phone. He was angry with me for a dozen big and little reasons that we began to untangle when he finally broke the silence. As the summer drew to a close, it was clear that my son was not coming back to live with me.

Tears—One autumn day after a weekend visit with her father, my daughter asked to talk with me. Only eleven years old, she was thoughtful and articulate. We sat down together on her bed and she held my hand.

"Mommy, you always taught me how to share. You've had me all your life and now it should be daddy's turn. I love you, Mommy. Please don't cry."

Almost fifteen years later, when I replay those words in my head I cry. I cry for my daughter who felt so torn between the love she had for both her parents. I cry for myself and the anguish I felt in coming to terms with her request.

How could I say yes?

How could I say no?

It seemed like such a reasonable request. She loved her dad and she missed having him in her daily life. He could offer her a home with two parents instead of one. And she missed her brother. They shared a special bond having helped each other through the divorce of their parents. She missed the hugs, whispered secrets and day-to-day banter that typified their relationship. How could I say no to my daughter who wanted to live in a home with a daddy and a "mommy" who loved her, a little brother who needed her, and a big backyard with two dogs?

But how could I say yes? Surely, this decision and its outcome for me, as a mother could be no different, no more painful, than the decision and outcome experienced by a father. It seemed reasonable that I was simply going through the grief my ex-husband had experienced at the time of our separation years earlier. And it wasn't like I was giving my daughter away! She wanted to go.

What unselfish reason could I have for wanting to keep her with me against her wishes? Would a good mother not want what was best for her children? And it wasn't like she was going to live with a stranger. This was her father! What kind of hypocrite was I, the feminist, to say that simply because I am a woman that I make a better parent than a man, her father! Nothing made me intrinsically more suitable than him as a parent. We may not have been successful as husband and wife but I had no reason to think he was not a competent parent. Furthermore, the custodial parent should be the one with the emotional and financial resources to raise the children. At the time of our separation it was I. Now things were different. Hours away from close friends and family, the pressures of building a career, a house, and a new family structure without my son had taken their toll on me. My equilibrium was gone. By agreeing to have my daughter live with her brother, both children would benefit from living in a home with more emotional and financial resources. And so, with a mix of sadness and hope for my children's happiness, I said yes.

That summer, only six months after my son moved in with his father, my daughter moved joined them. While there were many positive outcomes for my children, there were both expected and unanticipated consequences for me. I knew that I would no longer be part of the carefully woven detail of their everyday lives, but I had not imagined the enormity of the void created by the absence of my children. What knowing could ever prepare a mother for that loss?

When I returned to work the first Monday after my daughter left, I donned my emotional armour. I remember telling a colleague of mine. "Well, I always knew they'd leave home one day. But I just never imagined that day would come so soon." My attempt to use humour to deal with my pain was regarded as inappropriate at the very least, or worse yet, emotionally disengaged. While my family and a couple of friends⁴ seemed genuinely concerned, many expressed a kind of interest that bordered on morbid fascination.

Blood—Colleagues who had not previously engaged me in discussions of a personal nature were intrigued by my decision. The questions were variously phrased but the implications were clear. Why weren't the children living with me? Had the courts awarded custody to the father? Had I abused them? Had I neglected them? Was I unfit for some other reason? Did I have a "problem" with alcohol? Did I have a history of drug abuse? When I denied these causes for a change in custody, their questions took on a different tone. If there were no grounds for removing the children from my care, then why weren't they still with me? My simple answer was that the children wanted to live with their dad. Children want to do lots of things, I was told, but that doesn't mean that they get to decide where they live! Clearly I was abdicating my motherly duty to raise my children. Or perhaps, came the insinuation, there was a more ugly explanation. Was I using my children's feelings as a cover for my own deep seated desires to be childless and carefree? Was I putting my own needs before those of my children? What other reason could I have for downloading the care

of my children to another woman? In any case I was unfit to parent and the children were better off with their father.

My colleagues were not the only ones who questioned my decision. My ex-husband, some members of his family and his lawyers also understood my decision as motivated by personal desire. I had expected the custody settlement would be straight forward. Given our comparable annual incomes, I expected that my child support payments to him would be similar to those he had made to me. I expected to enjoy liberal visitation just as he had had available to him. How naive of me to expect that I would be treated fairly! Inequitable gender relations are the norm in our culture and the state is one site for the formal enforcement of those beliefs and practices.⁵ Therefore, to avoid a protracted and expensive legal battle that would undoubtedly have impacted on my relationship with my children, I agreed to his demands to double the support payments. Each month I wrote a cheque for half my net income. And each month I was reminded that the courts mete out harsh punishments for mothers who “give away” their children.

Sweat—Negotiating adequate access to my children was another regular reminder that I was a “bad” mother. Although my ex-husband had spent every other weekend with the children I found this an unbearably long time between visits. Unfortunately my requests to spend time with my children at least one day every weekend and one evening during the week were regarded as inconvenient and inappropriate. He said that children needed stability and consistency and that changing the schedule would be disruptive. I asked my ex-husband to consider the children’s wishes. Children, I was told, weren’t always in a position to decide what was best for them. The irony of these words was almost comical considering how my respect for the children’s wishes had empowered their dad to deny them their decision-making. Nevertheless, I was restricted, with few exceptions, to seeing my children every other weekend.

Tears—There were many supporters for a misguided interpretation of the change in custody. Allowing the children to live with their dad was my “choice” regardless of the limited range of flawed alternatives from which I made that choice. No complaining was permitted for those who make bad decisions. My loss was self-induced. My pain was obscene. Non-custodial mothers were not to be embraced. They were to be rejected with contempt. These outcomes were justly deserved. The loss of that daily connection to my children was not recognized as legitimate. With little support, my grief intensified. I cried alone and ashamed.

In the months that followed, my physical and emotional health deteriorated. Eating felt like pushing cardboard down my throat instead of the pleasure it had always been for me. I became obsessed with exercise, doing aerobics and weight-training for two hours daily. Normally a size 11, size 4 clothing had to be altered to fit. With about 100 lbs draping my 5’4” frame, my menstrual cycles became irregular and I could dress comfortably without a bra. Rather than getting the help I wanted (non-judgmental support), health professionals

began imposing demands on my routines. My family doctor insisted that I weigh in every week and see a counsellor twice a week. Both threatened to hospitalize me if I lost any more weight. The counsellor poked and prodded, in search of personal demons rather than interrupting my process of unbecoming. With so many aspects of my life controlled by others, I fought back with all the ritualized and resistant behaviours common among women with exercise and eating disorders.

My fragile physical appearance, my history of seeing a counsellor, my precarious financial state and my growing emotional distress over not being able to see my children began to shape my life in dynamic ways. To family, colleagues and the uninformed stranger, the reasons why my children lived with their father seemed increasingly obvious. I had become the image of the “bad” mother: self-absorbed, inadequate, out of control. When I looked in the mirror I could no longer see the “good” mother I believed myself to be. Gradually, my reasoned and reasonable explanations for not living with my own children seemed hollow even to my own ears.

Adding to my emotional distress was the unpleasantness of a dramatic change in my standard of living. To avert financial disaster, I sold the house I was building even before the final brick was laid. Over time, I moved from a three-bedroom townhouse to a two-bedroom condo and finally, to a one-bedroom basement apartment in a town closer to my children. On moving day, I discovered that the stairwell was too narrow for the box spring of my double mattress. For the next two years, I slept on a mattress on the floor. When my kids came on weekends, they “camped out” in sleeping bags on the living room carpet. My car, replaced by a smaller, more so-called sensible choice, remained parked most of the time to save gas. I walked to work. Despite my good wage, there was seldom money for even the smallest luxury. The irony was not lost on my children who had to choose between a trip to the local ice cream parlour or renting a video. Very quickly, I became an authority on free and nearly-free children’s activity.

Sweat—About a year after my daughter moved in with her dad I realized I needed to restore a sense of wellness and stability in my life. Taking back my birth name was one way of recreating my new healthy self. While I no longer shared my children’s surname, the symbolism of no longer bearing my ex-husband’s name was liberating. Accepting a challenging day job offer was another fresh beginning. For the most part, I was able to leave behind those who knew my story. Staying busy was my tonic and my evenings were filled with teaching classes at the college.

Relocating to a new town and job also allowed me to make new friends. Having learned a hard lesson, I presented myself differently. My experience taught me that acknowledging my children’s need for a healthy, happy life with their dad could be twisted by critics into some sick kind of selfishness on my part. My agonizing decisions about the welfare of my kids could be translated by others into the facile act of “giving away my children” like they were

unwanted property that I had cast off. I decided to draw clear separations between my personal and professional lives. As a nurse, this seemed especially crucial.

Nursing is organized on the ethic of care. My professional credibility had been called into question at my previous job by those who knew that I was a non-custodial mother. My emotional well-being and job security were too important to risk the probing questions and judgments of my new colleagues. Therefore, the desk in my new office was free of pictures of my children and other personal artifacts. These aspects of my life were no longer for public consumption.

As time went on, I settled into my home, my job and my new life. Determined to get out of debt, stay sane and ignore my pain, I enacted the role of the serious nursing professional focusing on the educational needs of the nurses in the organization. By avoiding casual conversations at work about marriage, family and children, I protected myself from having to think about or talk about my children and my status as a non-custodial mother.

For this reason, the easiest friendships developed with single and childless women. With this came access to a set of social privileges that were, until that time, unfamiliar to me. I began to enjoy the freedom of staying late at work when I pleased; accepting a last minute invitation to dinner; ignoring the laundry when it spilled over the basket; watching a television program without having to negotiate with anyone. Even time with my kids felt different. I realized that I had become the good times parent instead of the everyday parent who refereed disputes and monitored chores and school work.

Tears—One day, however, I overheard someone making reference to me and the long hours I worked. My all-consuming commitment to my career was, they supposed, compensation for never marrying or having children. I could not believe my ears. Wasn't it bad enough that I didn't share my daily life with my children? Now, my decision not to include my children in my day-to-day conversations was like denying their very existence.

What had I done? I was awash with awesome grief. This was the ultimate betrayal. Selfish, I screamed silently. There was no other way to characterize my silence about my status as a non-custodial mother, motivated as it was by my desire to protect my job and preserve my health. Again, I turned this anger inward, joining the parade of friends and strangers who condemned me. I understood their charges. The evidence was irrefutable. I had unbecome a mother.

And now ... My story illustrates what we have known for a long time. There is inequity in the relationship of men and women to their children. Fathers who "help" raise their children are notable and laudable exceptions to the parenting rule. Following the dissolution of a relationship, the norm is for men to become non-custodial fathers yet ordinary talk does not describe non-custodial fathers as "giving up" their children. Nor is being a non-custodial father regarded as a character flaw or a hindrance to secure employment. Most

are viewed with empathy. It is common for so-called weekend dads to have the support of family and friends to care and nurture their children. Historically, some non-custodial fathers have totally abdicated their parental responsibilities with few social or legal repercussions.⁶ When men do assume custody, everyday talk hails them as saviours rescuing their children from neglectful or abusive mothers or women “who’ve gone off to find themselves.”⁷ What is remarkable here is that many custodial fathers do not assume the primary parenting role but, as was true in my situation, live with women who carry out most of the parenting responsibilities (as is the rule in most two-parent heterosexual families).

By contrast, women are expected to raise their biological children and participate in their daily lives. Following the dissolution of a relationship, mothers usually assume custody. Here too, women are seen as simply fulfilling their so-called natural duty. Non-custodial mothers are the rarity. Women who do not raise their biological children are demonized as deviant, unnatural or unfit. These beliefs are found in language that is constituted by and organizes the relationships between men and women and their children. The everyday talk that describes women as “surrendering,” “giving away,” and “giving up” their children illustrates the contempt society has for women who don’t conform to accepted social practices. Little wonder that discussing my status as a non-custodial mother was variously met with stony silence, morbid curiosity, or thinly-veiled disgust. This story illustrates the penalties that befall a woman who does not reproduce social expectations—expectations that are sharply different from those expected of men.

What is new about this story is the focus on how these social realities shape the experience of becoming a non-custodial mother. The categories of “bad” mother and “good” mother are powerful and fluid. They operate to remind women of their place as mothers (both glorified and undervalued) in a pronatalist, patriarchal, heterosexist society. These categories infuse our lives and shape how we come to think about and perform mothering. At the same time, they bear no resemblance to the day-to-day reality of mother work.

As a custodial mother, my relationship to my children was socially visible in that I was a single mom doing what was expected of me. The specialness of our intimate connection as mother and child was less visible. What was socially important was that I was fulfilling my obligation to raise the children that I bore. Later, as a non-custodial mother, my relationship to my children was still visible as the absence left by stepping outside the boundaries of “good” mother. The reasons for my decision were not viewed as particularly relevant. What was important was the image of a woman abdicating her (female) parental responsibility. My diverse responses to the struggles I faced being a non-custodial mother contributed to the image of a woman who was self-absorbed, inadequate and out of control. The evidence was there. Mine was behaviour unbecoming a mother. And so this story illustrates the subtle shifting from an

authentic category of mother to a delegitimated state of non-mother—a process characterized by blood, sweat, and tears.

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Mother's Day Symposium hosted by the Association for Research on Mothering at York University on May 6, 2000.

²Writing about this time in our lives in a testimony to the love and support of my adult children. To you, Amy and Brad, I offer my public thanks for helping me re-imagine what it means to be a good mother.

³The words "bad" mother and "good" mother are in quotations to emphasize the socially constructed nature of these ways of thinking and talking about motherhood. As I argue elsewhere (Gustafson, 2001), the "good" mother is a naturalized, reified and unattainable ideal state. Historically and currently, the church and state are central organizers of the relations between men and women in the family. While the category of the "good" mother is not fixed, the beliefs, appearance and behaviour reflect and reinforce white, middle-class, Christian values about women and their relationship their children and the men who fathered them. The "bad" mother is constructed as an unnatural, aberrant women and the antithesis of the "good" mother.

⁴The love and non-judgmental support of my parents, sisters and my friends, Karen Martin and Brenda Osborne sustained me through my four difficult years as a non-custodial mother. They deserve my public thanks. The joy of spending time with my children was the cherished reward for making it through the days between our visits.

⁵When both children returned to live with me, the inequities in the way the courts deal with mothers and fathers were again visible. The child support payments required of my ex-husband were reduced to two-thirds of the amount I made as a non-custodial mother.

⁶Recently, the courts began to enforce custody arrangements by pursuing fathers who are delinquent in child support.

⁷This phrase was used on a CBC radio morning show to describe an upcoming interview with a woman who left her children in the care of their father. The interview hosted by Sara Cooper was aired later that week on the Friday before Mother's Day, May 12, 2000.

References

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