

**Andrea O'Reilly**

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## **A Mom and Her Son *Thoughts on Feminist Mothering***

Over the past year I have been working on an edited volume tentatively entitled *Mothers and Sons: Feminism, Masculinity and the Challenge to Raise Good Men* to be published this fall by Routledge. This book was developed from the conference, “Mothers and Sons: Challenges and Possibilities” that I coordinated on behalf of the Center for Feminist Research and The Association for Research on Mothering, in the fall of 1998 at York University. As I wrote my chapter for this collection, edited the other submissions and wrote the introduction to the volume, I found myself composing in my head, scribbling along the margins of this book another mother and son narrative, that of my relationship with my soon-to-be 16-year-old son, Jesse O’Reilly-Conlin. As I sorted out the book’s thematic sections and sought to clarify a particular feminist theoretical position for my own chapter, I would continuously catch myself lost in thought, reflecting upon Jesse and my relationship and quite oblivious to the urgent scholarly matters that awaited me on the computer screen. More often than not, the bright colours of my screen saver would awaken me from my reverie and call me back to the world of research and theory. I think of this narrative—the personal one about me and my son—as a story both of interruption and postponement—while it is a story that demands to be told, it is a story that I have delayed telling.

Feminism, writes Babette Smith (1996) in *Mothers and Sons* “has failed the mothers of sons” (ix) As both a feminist mother of a son and an academic who teaches and researches the mother-son relation, I have often reflected upon this statement by Smith. Have we in our academic and personal interest in the mother-daughter relationship, as I inquired in my *Mothers and Sons* book, wronged our sons, let them down or simply forgotten about them? Have we in our negligence or disinterest, academic and otherwise, given our sons up to



*Jesse (at six weeks) and Andrea, September 1984*

patriarchy, done to them what we have spent our lives fighting against for ourselves and our daughters? I know that I have spent far more time this past decade thinking about mothers and daughters as I raised my own two girls, Casey and Erin, now 10 and 13. However, as I wrote my articles, edited my books on mothers and daughters, and designed and taught a course on the topic, and as I sought to raise my girls in a feminist fashion, my son and my concerns for him as a male child in a patriarchal culture were always there, hovering, phantom-like, just beyond full consciousness or articulation. As with other mothers of sons and women who care deeply about boys today, I worried about Jesse and wondered whether he was, would be, okay in a world that seemed destined to harm and maim him emotionally, spiritually, and, increasingly, physically as he grew into manhood. As time passed, I became more and more disturbed by the feminist silence surrounding mothers and sons and my own inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to theorize the mother-son relation and my relationship with Jesse as I had done for mothers and daughters in general, and my two daughters in particular. I initiated the “Mothers and Sons” conference and the book mentioned above in an attempt to make sense out of, at least from an academic point-of-view, the disturbing and puzzling silence surrounding mothers and sons and as a way to begin a feminist dialogue on what I felt to be an urgent and timely matter. However, as I worked on the book, identifying and investigating the salient issues of this new and emerging field of inquiry, my own story as a feminist mother of a son, as I mentioned above, kept intruding upon and interrupting, like some post-modern ellipse, the trajectory of my theoretical ponderings. I realized then that my understanding of the mother-



*Jesse (at two years old) and Andrea fishing, August 1986*

son relation would remain fragmentary and partial until I remembered—remembered/recollected/relived—to paraphrase Toni Morrison’s (1987) term, my own narrative, I needed to sort out for myself how feminism has shaped the mothering of my son and how being a mother of a son has redefined my feminism. I realized that in order to understand the bigger picture—feminist theory on mothers and sons—I needed to sketch my own mother and son portrait. To that I now turn.

This narrative is evidently my own; my son has his own story that I hope will be told at another time and place. I am a 39-year-old woman of Irish, Scottish and English ancestry, a professor of women’s studies, and a mother of three children—a son 15, two daughters 10 and 13. Together with my common-law male spouse of 18 years, I have been engaged in what I like to call radical nurturance—a feminist, socialist, anti-racist, nonheterosexist /abilist, and learning/education centred parenting.<sup>1</sup> I was raised in a middle-class family by a working-class mother. My mother, from, what is called in my hometown Hamilton, the “wrong side of the tracks” was a “divorceé” with a six-year-old daughter when she met and married my father—a man from a “good,” established Catholic family—in the late 1950s and settled down in the new post war suburbia to start a family. My class affiliation is thus middle-class though I was mothered more in accordance with working-class styles and values of childrearing; my spouse’s class identity, in contrast is decidedly and proudly working-class.

I found myself pregnant with my first child, my son, in the fourth year of my Bachelor of Arts at the age of 22. Motherhood was something I had planned



*Jesse and Andrea in Vancouver, March 1996*

to do at 30-something, only after both the career and the guy were firmly established. I was not supposed to become pregnant this way: young, poor and in a dating relationship. Well, we decided to have the baby and three weeks later I found myself setting up house (if such a thing is possible in student residence) with this man, obscenely happy, eagerly awaiting the birth of this child. I believed my life would go ahead as planned. I reassured my mother that with my child in daycare at six weeks, my studies would resume as scheduled. I did not know then, could not have known then, how completely pregnancy and later motherhood would change, completely and forever, life as I knew it.

In the early months of pregnancy I was horribly ill with unrelenting nausea; in the later months I developed the serious condition of preeclampsia which necessitated the daily monitoring of my blood pressure. I wrote a brilliant paper on the plight of “fallen women” in Victorian literature as my feet swelled and my back ached; the ironies in retrospect are splendid. Labour destroyed any remnants of complacency left over from my pre-pregnant self. I hemorrhaged during labour. I never experienced such pain, terror, or aloneness, nor have I since. When my son was finally born, pulled from my body by forceps, my spouse held him as I watched the doctors attempt to repair my ripped and torn self.

Nothing, as any new mother will tell you, can prepare you for the numbing exhaustion and physic dislocation of new motherhood. Nor can anyone warn you about how deeply you will fall in love with your child. Motherhood, as Marni Jackson (1992) so aptly puts it, “is like Albania—you can’t trust the descriptions in the books, you have to go there” (3). Motherhood radicalized and politicized me; it brought me to feminism. Though I had identified myself



*Jesse, Andrea, and Jean (Andrea's mom), Summer Solstice, Norway, June 1999*

as a feminist for a number of years; motherhood made feminism real for me and radically redefined it. At 23 I knew in my gut, though I could not yet fully articulate it, that my feminism was to be centred on motherhood. I believed as well that if feminism required of women, in either thought or deed, a repudiation of motherhood I did not want to be a part of it. If I had to deny or downplay my maternal self (as if such were possible) to “make it,” I was not interested in playing the game. Quoting Audrey Lorde (1996), I believed, as I do now, that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110). Though I now realize, some 16 years later, that had I been willing to cleave off my maternal self and “pass” as a non-mother, my stay in academe—as a graduate student, contract faculty and, more recently, tenure-track faculty—would have been a great deal easier, though far less rewarding.

I became a mother through the birth of a son. All the while pregnant, as I increasingly identified with the radical feminist celebration of sisterhood, I deeply longed for a daughter. As I marched with my girlfriends on International Women’s Day, I believed I marched for and with my unborn daughter, Sarah. However, as the days of my pregnancy passed, and as I caressed my swelling belly and talked to my unborn child, I knew with an uncanny certainty that “she” was a boy. Lesbian author and poet Jess Wells (1997), in her appropriately entitled narrative “Born on Foreign Soil,” movingly recounts the displeasure and dismay, fear and panic, she felt upon learning through ultrasound and amniocentesis that her assumed-to-be girl was in fact a boy “I was profoundly disappointed,” writes Wells, “I wept. I sobbed to my friends” (20). Wells wondered, “What did mothers and sons have in common? What could they do together” and worried, as a “separatist, punk dyke, a radical feminist” that she



*Jesse and Andrea, March 2000*

would be, in her words, “spawn[ing] a member of the oppressing class” (21). As my son was pulled from my body and I was told that “it was a boy” there was a deep and searing pang of disappointment, but as I came to know and love my son, he was no longer a boy, but simply, for better or worse, Jesse.

With my first pregnancy, I lost what I refer to today as my feminist innocence. I discovered that feminism, by and large, has, at best, an ambivalent relationship to motherhood. When feminist friends and women’s studies classmates learned of my unplanned pregnancy, I was greeted with sentiments of pity and concern and when I spoke with joy and pride about my pregnancy and, later my children, my colleagues seemed suddenly suspicious of my feminism and made me feel as if I had in some irrevocable and fundamental way failed feminism—sold out, been duped, gone over to the other side, or, in the language of current feminist discourse—fallen prey to the false consciousness of patriarchal ideology. Being a mother of a son made my motherhood identity all that much more problematic. Once at a union meeting shortly after the birth of our son, a woman with whom I had recently developed a friendship, stopped by to chat and upon learning that the baby she cooed at in the carriage was a boy, looked straight at me and said “what a shame and waste that a good woman like you was now going to spend her life raising a man” and with that, turned and walked away. In March of this year—nearly 16 years later— as I discussed the topic of this journal issue at the Association for Research on Mothering booth at the International Women’s Day Fair in Toronto, two women dismissed both me and the topic of sons with a laugh that implied that a feminist would have to be an utter fool to spend her time worrying about boys. While views such as these are, no doubt, rare, I do believe they bespeak a larger feminist discomfort

or disinterest in the topic of mothers and sons. Be that as it may, I can say with complete certainty, after years of teaching and researching the topic of motherhood, that feminists have been far more interested in daughters than in sons, though as of late there has been an emergent feminist interest in sons, due in part to the recent preoccupation with men and masculinity in the popular media.

The aim of this article however is not to account for the silence or to chart the emergence of this new field of feminist inquiry. Rather, I am interested in exploring, from a personal viewpoint, how my identity as a feminist influenced the mothering of my son and how, in turn, my identity as a mother of a son shaped my feminism. I turn now to the first question.

My son Jesse, who will be 16 this summer, would be regarded as a “feminist success story.” He and I enjoy a close and intimate relationship; he is as comfortable grabbing my hand, or placing his arm over my shoulders as he is debating with me the finer points of feminism or competing with me at the gym. He is sensitive and kind; wise and gentle, witty and affable; empathetic and thoughtful, reliable and generous, hard-working and yet fun-loving; modeling in both his behaviour and demeanor so-called masculine and feminine attributes. He is adamantly anti-racist, anti-elitist/classist, feminist, and in particular anti-heterosexist in his politics. Occasionally, I am congratulated on raising such a fine feminist son; more often I am asked “How I did it?” This question, each time I am asked it, leaves me feeling baffled, anxious, and strangely off-centre. I don’t believe it is possible and certainly not desirable to format a blueprint of feminist mothering; mothers don’t need yet another normative discourse of the good mother. Moreover, we know that a whole array of influences—the media, popular culture, genetics, peer groups, schools, extended family and the like—have as much say, if not more, in how our children “turn out.” At the same time, however, I realize that my son’s feminine sensibilities and feminist leanings are surely no accident in a patriarchal culture that does its utmost to ensure that boys are anything but feminine and feminist.

Today, standing on my tiptoes, to kiss my son good-bye, I saw a young man, wearing his long hair, as he has done since he was nine, in a ponytail, sporting his normal attire of a tie-dye t-shirt and blue jeans, (and not a name brand in sight), carrying in his hand his *Merchant of Venice*, which we had discussed the night before, debating whether the play is anti-Semitic, as it is often assumed. Jesse, with his straight-A grades, basic decency, his love of his immediate and extended family, and so on and so forth, would do any mother proud. But what I marvel at is his determination to be himself, his refusal to give in to peer pressure, and his unwillingness to compromise his principles. Given that he has lived in a very conservative, very white, rural community since the age of eight, and attended a school that is often racist, sexist, and consistently homophobic his conviction and courage are admirable. I remember how he was teased about his long hair; and ridiculed about his odd parents; those leftie, “shacked up hippies on the hill.” I also recall the many times Jesse came home

from school or ball practice deeply upset and troubled by the “fag” jokes and queer-bashing he encountered on the playground. But I also remember a son who in Grade 6 wrote and presented a speech about Rosa Parks and won the School Speech award. In Grade 8 he did a major research report on homophobia; this year he wrote for his history assignment an essay on female genital mutilation. No doubt such views are anomalies and aberrations in our very straight (in all senses of the word), conservative “Pleasantville-like” community and no doubt we, his leftie parents, must bear/take some responsibly or credit (depending on who you are) for our son “turning out this way.”

However, to return to the question asked above,—the impact of my feminism on the mothering of my son— or the related question “How did I raise him to be a feminist” I still find myself circling the question, uncertain how to proceed. First, I can not honestly say that I consciously raised him to be a feminist nor I am sure that my son would identify himself as a feminist. With my daughters, my feminist mothering was overt, explicit and to the point. With my middle girl, an avid reader, for example, I would buy for her, as she began to read independently, only books by women; a justified censorship, I reasoned, given that she will be reading plenty of misogynist male-authored books in later life. Over dinner, in the car, I informed them of the injustices of patriarchy and catalogued women’s achievements. No topic was taboo; a normal dinner conversation in our household, from the time they could sit up in a highchair, would shift from the witch burnings to suffrage in the time it takes to say “pass the broccoli please.” Every film, music videos, song, commercial they have seen, has been analyzed “to death,” their misogyny, homophobia, racism tracked and exposed. I used to change the endings of fairy tales when I read to the children at night; allowing the princess to “live with the prince only after she got her PhD.” This year I temporarily pulled my daughter from her school in an act of protest when the principal prohibited her from wearing a particular top, saying it was “distracting to the boys.” The mothering of my girls has been actively and adamantly feminist and my daughters unequivocally identify themselves as feminist, though my 13-year-old would identify more with “third wave grrr!” feminism than the feminism of my generation.

With my son, the relationship between my mothering and my feminism has been less direct and perhaps more complicated. Though Jesse has certainly been a part of thousands of conversations about women, feminism and patriarchy, he has not been schooled and cautioned about patriarchy with the same rigour and thoroughness as my daughters have. Furthermore, his autonomy, emotional, economical and otherwise have not been as emphasized in his upbringing as it was for his sisters. Nonetheless my son, as noted above, has feminine characteristics and feminist political leanings. How did this come to be in a patriarchal culture? The answer, despite the seeming complexity of the question, is, I think, quite simple and straightforward.

My son has a clearly defined feminine dimension to his personality because such was allowed and affirmed in his upbringing. My son, since his



birth, has been an exceptionally sensitive child who needed a great deal of attention and care, emotional, physical, and otherwise. In his first year of life he spent more time in my arms and at my breast than he did in his crib. He could not fall asleep at night without me lying in bed beside him until his early school years. Two-and-a-half years after my son was born, I would watch my newborn daughter sitting in her infant chair alone for hours on end contentedly playing with her fingers and toes; I was convinced there was something profoundly wrong with her. At the tender age of one she put herself to bed and has since. She announced to me at the ripe old age of two that “I am the boss of myself” each and every time I asked her to do something; at the same age my son would not leave my side. I remember one day, I suggested to my son (age three) as we walked past the playground that he should go in and have a play while I nursed his sister. He looked at me quite terrified and, backing away from the playground gate, proclaimed with feigned stubbornness that he would not go in there. When I, quite baffled by his behaviour, asked him why, he explained “because children were in there.” (We ended up waiting until the daycare kids left before going in for a swing and some sand play.) This image always stands in sharp contrast to the memory of my youngest daughter, also three, running through the same playground in a blur of winter hats and scarves as I waited to pick her up from daycare.

I do not recall these events to prescribe “what a good mother should do” but rather to illustrate that my son, from birth, was “always/already” a child with so-called feminine sensibilities. But it would be dishonest of me to say that raising such a child, boy or girl, was easy. I believe that with every child there is a difficult, or as the parenting books would delicately put it, a “challenging” age or stage. With my son, it was, without a doubt, his first five years. He needed so much time, care, and attention that his seemingly endless demands left me exasperated and exhausted, trapped in those bad mother days that Mary Kay Blakey (forthcoming) describes so poignantly.<sup>2</sup> However, despite my fatigue, irritability, and anger, I more often than not held/comforted him when he cried, cuddled him at nights, stayed close to him physically/emotionally and honoured and protected his shy and sensitive personality not because I was a “good mother,” not even because I was a feminist mother wanting to raise a “good” man, but simply and quite honestly because it seemed to be the decent, normal and only thing to do. When a child (boy or girl) cries, you give comfort; when a child feels lonely, you provide companionship, when a child is afraid you offer reassurance; such was my basic, but looking back now, eminently reasonable, childrearing philosophy at the age of 23 when I first became a mother.

On my son’s first day of kindergarten when he asked if I could stay with him, I simply said yes, found a comfortable rocking chair (I had my six-week-old daughter with me), nursed my baby, and spent a morning in kindergarten as I had done a quarter century before. A few years later, when we moved and my son changed schools in December of Grade 3, I went with him, at his

request, to his classroom on his first day and stayed with him. This time my visit was shorter; after ten or fifteen minutes, my son, with tears still falling from his eyes, told me that he would be okay now and that I could go. No doubt we were an odd sight that morning; me, a 30-something mother, sitting in one of those straight back school chairs, kindly provided by the teacher, beside my son, in his place in a row of desks, all the while tears are streaming down my son's face with me trying to act as if my heart was not breaking. I am sure that many people thought in mothering my child this way, I was spoiling "it"; or worse, because he was a boy, I was coddling and emasculating him, tying him to my apron strings and turning him into a "mama's boy." No doubt I worried about that too. But what I remember most about raising a son is loving him and that meant making sure he felt loved, protected, and good about himself. My son grew up with the knowledge that it was alright to be a sensitive boy and indeed quite normal to need your mother.

Today, when teachers, my friends, and other adults, describe my son, what is mentioned more often than any other aspect of his personality, is a sense of groundedness, not necessarily self-confidence, but more specifically a self-acceptance and assurance in being who is his. I realize now that in my resistance to traditional practices of masculinization I was modeling for my son the authentic, radical mothering that Judith Arcana (1979), Adrienne Rich (1986), Sara Ruddick (1989) among others, argue is necessary for a daughter's empowerment, and, I would add, makes possible a son's self assurance/acceptance in being different. More than 21 years ago, long before my son was born, Audrey Lorde wrote about the power of such feminist mothering in her now-classic "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response." It seems fitting to end this section of my narrative with Lorde's words:

The strongest lesson. I can teach my son is the same lesson I can teach my daughter: how to be who he wishes to be for himself. And the best way I can do this is to be who I am and hope that he will learn from this not to be me, which is not possible, but how to be himself. And this means how to move to that voice within himself, rather than to those raucous, persuasive, or threatening voices from outside, pressuring him to be what the world wants him to be" (1996: 77)

In allowing my son to be who he was, in affirming this difference and doing this despite social demands to the contrary I suppose I raised my son "feminist" or, at the very least, I raised a son comfortable with the so-called feminine dimension of his personality. My son is also, in his political views, and personal ways, very feminist. However, I do not think he would identify himself as a feminist. Rather his feminist beliefs are for him simply the normal way to see the world. Jesse, as with his sisters, has been raised with, what seem to them, quite sensible, but are specifically, socialist, anti racist/heterosexist, feminist, values. All individuals—and my vegetarian daughter would add species—are

deserving of respect and equality; each entitled to a fair share of the world's resources, valued for their differences across race, class, ability, sexuality and gender, and deserving of a full life of meaningful work, good friendships and a loving family. I, along with my spouse, have sought to model in my day-to-day living, and to teach to my children what Carol Gilligan (1982) and others have defined as an ethic of care; or more specifically a world view based on the values of love, respect, fairness, peace, and decency. These values have been fed to them, if you will, since they were babes in arms, served alongside their pablum and later bagels and cream cheese. Feminism for my son is not a politic or an identity but rather and quite simply a lens through which he views and understands the world. When my children started to encounter sentiments of racism, homophobia and sexism they were surprised, incredulous, and indeed quite confused. They could not understand why seemingly smart people, in the lingo of the schoolyard, could be "so stupid"; "all people are equal, good, etc." they reasoned, thus the person saying otherwise must be the fool. Of course, as they grew, they came to realize that what they understood to be the sane and sensible, normal and natural way to be in the world—good, fair, decent to people regardless of race, class etc—was not seen as such by most of the children in our very conservative community. My children now understand that in their community and in the world generally, what seems to them perfectly sensible is, in fact, a particular political stance, and one that is not shared by most. Nonetheless, even today my ten-year-old daughter simply can not make sense of racism; why would someone dislike a person simply because of their skin colour, birth place etc; for her that is just "idiotic." Likewise, my son supports feminism not because he is a feminist per se but because for him that is what any sane and sensible person would do. I could not agree more.

In the conclusion to "Who are We This Time?" Mary Kay Blakey writes:

If I've taught [my sons] something about women and justice, my jock sons have taught me something about being a sport. In our ongoing discussions of gender politics, I've looked at the issues as urgently as ever, but through the lens of love and hope rather than anger and despair. (forthcoming)

My feminism too has been rethought, reworked and redefined in and through the mothering of my son, most significantly in terms of the way I understand gender difference. Prior to my sons' birth, I identified with a radical feminist theory of gender difference that positioned "the feminine" (meaning the traits normally associated with the feminine: nurturance, sensitivity, intuition, empathy, relationality, cooperation, etc.) and "the masculine" as more or less fixed and oppositional categories with the former superior to the later. Crudely put, I saw the feminine as good; the masculine as bad and women were, more or less, feminine and men masculine as a consequent of patriarchal gender socialization. I defined myself as "feminine" and was happy to do so.

However, as my son grew and he seemed far more “feminine” in his disposition than his two sisters, my complacent and simplistic understanding of gender difference was called into question. My son was both feminine and masculine; so too were his sisters. I learned through being a mother of a son that gender is not pure, essential, or stable, but, as post-modernism teaches us, fluid, shifting and contested. However, as I came to appreciate the inevitable instability of gender, I continued to define myself as feminine and regarded it as superior though I now conceded that these preferred traits were available to men as well as women.

As my son grew and I started to spend more time with him, “hanging out” as it were, I realized that the two of us were alike in many ways and that our similarities were to be found in our so called shared masculine characteristics. This came as quite a surprise as I had never considered myself “masculine” in any sense of the word. However, with Jesse I saw myself in a different light, and came to realize that many of my personality traits are indeed masculine. I am adventurous, assertive, ambitious, more rational than emotional, carefree, usually confident, and often competitive. I pride myself on my independence, resolve, intelligence and resourcefulness, and attribute the successes I have had in life to my drive, tenacity, stamina, resiliency, self-sufficiency, and willingness to take risks. My friends joke that I am type-A personality personified. I realize now that, while I always knew I had this type of personality, I would not self-identify as such because to do so would mean admitting to being masculine. However, over the last few years as Jesse has grown into a man, and has begun to demonstrate many of these traits, I have named them in myself and come to see them as good and desirable as long as they are balanced with feminine characteristics as I believe they are with Jesse and myself. Being the mother of a “good” son I have come to realize that the masculine is not inherently evil and through this realization I have been able to discover and honour dimensions of my personality that were before unknown or shameful to me.

Eight months ago, after much urging from my son, he and I joined the local gym; we now go four to five days a week in the hour between picking him up from school and the time when my daughters’ school day ends. Like many women my age, I grew up hating my body. As a teenager I was a compulsive dieter, in my 20s, as I came to both feminism and motherhood, I saw my body as an enemy—an instrument of patriarchal power and control—and by my late 30s I had, more or less, forgotten about, given up on my body, and lived, as do many academics, completely in my head. Working out in the gym I have come to trust, love, respect, challenge, and honour my body as I have done throughout my life with my mind. I feel, in an odd way, reborn as if I have been introduced to a new self; a self more complete and whole; strong and brave. From our time at the gym together, Jesse and I have developed a close bond based on something that is uniquely our own. No doubt many of the young men at the gym, most of whom go to Jesse’s highschool, find it odd that a mom and her teen son would hang out at the gym together. But my son and I delight in each

other's company, take pride in each other's accomplishments, and have a great deal of fun doing so.

This week I started horseback riding lessons with my youngest daughter, an activity that I would not have undertaken without this new confidence and trust in my body, particularly because I was thrown from a horse when I was 13, never to ride again. After our first lesson, my aching hamstring muscles let me know that I would have to change my workout routine in order to strengthen these muscles. So yesterday at the gym, I tried some machines that I had not used before. At one point I dragged Jesse over to a machine and asked him to explain how it worked. The machine requires that you lie on your back and, with your legs extended, push up and down a press that has weights attached to it. There is a partial and a complete lift. On my back, with Jesse beside me I did the partial lift and then, at my signal, he released the lever to the full lift. Well the weight came down and my weak hamstrings muscles could not push the press up so there I lay, my thighs almost pressed to my face unable to move. Jesse and I finally managed to lift the weight and release me. I remember both of us laughing out loud, to the surprise and chagrin of the guy jocks who take working out very seriously. At that moment, as I looked at my son, I thought about this narrative and had one of those rare but profoundly wondrous moments of joy and revelation. It felt right and good to be me, the mother of this man. Reflecting upon this today, I realize that what was revealed to me in that moment was precisely the thesis, if you will, of this narrative: that my son has made me a better person and hence a better feminist, and my feminism has allowed him to become the good man he was meant to be.

I would like to conclude this narrative by recalling two pivotal turning points in my intellectual travels that lead me to this article. The first occurred in the summer of 1995 when I attended a session on "Mothers and Sons" at a Women's Studies/Feminist conference in Scotland. Presented at the session was a preliminary report of interviews the presenters had conducted with feminist mothers of sons. Though the details of their research are evidently important, what was significant to me was their conclusion and the discussion that followed. The feminist mothers of sons interviewed for this study, the presenters concluded, while they had initially been committed to feminist childrearing, had all, more or less, given in up in their attempt to challenge and circumvent their sons becoming sexist and traditionally masculine. They provided numerous quotations to illustrate the frustration, disillusionment, and resignation felt by these mothers. But all I can remember is the rage and despair I felt when I heard these words.

In the question period, I raised my hand and struggled to put into words the rush of emotions in my heart: "I know that it is hard to go up against patriarchy but we can't give up so quickly and easily. Our sons deserve more ... our world deserves more.... The struggle to save our daughters from patriarchy has been equally as tough but we have not given up on them ... we can't just give up on our sons." My protests fell largely on deaf ears. Most in the audience

agreed with the presenters, some reasoned that our time would be most effectively spent on our daughters, others suggested that perhaps mothers, even feminist ones, secretly take pride in their sons traditional masculinity and thus don't really want to change things and others cautioned that perhaps feminist mothering would turn our sons into misfits, cause them to be miserable.

I left the room shaking and immediately went to a pay phone to call home and talk to Jesse. My spouse answered the phone and before I could get a word in edgewise he relayed the various newsworthy events of our children's final day of school before summer holidays. The most significant news was that our son, our child who proudly and publicly affirmed his difference every chance he got, had been chosen by his classmates in a year-end ceremony as "the person most liked by others." Politically I find these contests offensive, but at that moment I felt vindicated and wanted to rush back in the room—I think I would have had the session been still on—and say "told you so!" Or more reasonably, I would have tried to explain to them that my feminist mothering had not made my son a freak; in fact it had enabled him to take pride in his difference and become, in his uniqueness and his self-acceptance, the type of person people genuinely like.

The second event is more an image than a story. Last summer, my son, my mother and I spent two weeks in Norway and then a week in London as part of my conference/research travels. My son, like myself, is an avid traveler; since he was eight, he has accompanied me on numerous research "road trips" throughout the United States. But this was his first time overseas. My mother, likewise, loves to travel and she and I have traveled a great deal together. However this was the first time we—a 14-year-old son, 38-year-old mother, and a 68-year-old mother/ grandmother—would be traveling together. Our trip would include a weekend jaunt to Svalbard, as close as you can get to the North Pole (a 2 hour flight from northern Norway), a five-day journey down the coast of Norway in a coastal steamer, four days in Tromsø (place of conference) and day in Bergen and Oslo and finally a week in busy London. (I am still paying off this trip, nearly a year later !)

While I eagerly awaited the trip, I wondered whether we were up to each other's company for a full three weeks: bunking together in the same room (on the boat our "room" would be the size of a closet), and all the time moving by boat, train, airplane from place to place. As well I worried that my son, in his youthful exuberance, would wear my mother out the first day and that he would not survive one of her shopping excursions. I need not have worried for though there were the usual upsets as there always are when people travel together, this journey will remain one of my fondest memories of motherhood.

Though there are hundreds of photos from this trip and even more photos in my mind, each more beautiful than the last, I would like to conclude this narrative with just one. It is that of my son, my mother and myself on the top deck of the steamer, as we stood by the railing of the ship, close to breathless in awe of the scenery before us. As we stood there, my son placed one of his arms

around me and the other around my mother and, gesturing to the fjords across the water, said “Isn’t it beautiful?” For me the beauty of the moment was less in the fjords than in the three of us together standing arm in arm. While countless circumstances brought us to that moment, I now know, as I conclude this narrative, that what made that moment truly possible was the feminist mothering of my son. That is what I shall write beneath the photograph when it is placed in the photo album.

<sup>1</sup>In this article I refer to our children as my children and explore raising these children largely in terms of my experience of mothering them. I do this because the article is concerned with Jesse and my relationship as son and mother. However, in practice, my spouse is as committed to the parenting described in the article and our children are as fully and completely his as they are mine.

<sup>2</sup>“Every one of my friends,” writes Blakely, “has a bad day somewhere in her history, she wishes she could forget, but can’t afford it. A very bad day changes you forever” (forthcoming).

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