

Susan Dundas

Lesbian Second Mothering

I am a child and infant psychiatrist, and the biological and non-biological mother of my children. My partner and I have been together, for better or worse, for 14 years. We have experienced the death of both our biological mothers during our relationship. My mother died three weeks before the birth of our son. On her admission to palliative care three days before she died, she felt my partner's belly and spoke her regret that she would not see our baby. My biological daughter, born 2 years later was named after her. My partner's mother became grandmother and nanny to both of our children for their first two-and-one-half years. She died when my son was only six, and my daughter four. My children may not consciously remember either grandmother when they become parents, but their grandmothers have and will continue to profoundly affect their development.

This is a story about mothering. I have kept a journal from early in my partner's pregnancy until the early days of my own biological child's life. Parenting made it difficult to continue the journal or perhaps my creative energies were otherwise preoccupied. These journals remain, however, to remind me of those early feelings as I integrated the loss of my own mother and the responsibility of being a parent. My mother died when I was 32 years old and yet my thought at that time was that "I had become an orphan." The pregnancy had been a distraction from my grieving, but not as much a distraction as I might have imagined. I had no idea how to be a non-biological second parent to my first-born child. I had no references or mirrors to view my reflection. The sense of separateness or confusion about my role in my son's life began at the beginning.

We chose an anonymous donor and a lesbian-friendly gynecologist. She was warm and real and the donor remains fairly unreal to me. Pregnancy came

quickly. My partner called me at work and told me. I was in shock. I was confused. “She” was pregnant and yet I was going to become a parent. This wasn’t surrogacy or adoption. I wasn’t pregnant, or was I?

At eleven weeks after conception, my partner experienced a bleed. I was immediately struck by grief and panic. She remained calm. She had a “sense” or a “feeling” that our baby was okay. It was a weekend and we had to wait two days for the ultrasound. I could not be reassured that he was okay until I saw his very active little body on the ultrasound. She had an instinct that I could only be reassured by an ultrasound. This experience underlined a feeling I would struggle with throughout my early parenting experience—insecurity. During prenatal classes we were the only lesbian couple. At one point the trainer asked the mothers to go to one side of the room and the coaches to the other. I was again confused by words, if not by meaning. I knew what she meant, but I was reminded again that my role did not have descriptors. We, as a family, would need to write the script and make it up as we went along. As a child psychiatrist, I spoke about parenting to people all the time, but nothing I read or observed during my training taught me how to behave or explained what I was feeling.

The delivery was exciting, frightening, thrilling and, for me, painless. I did not have labour, although I was very tired by the end of it all.

Our new baby boy came into the world healthy and unprepared for the family that was his birthright. After six days we bravely went out for a cappuccino with our baby on my belly. In one store a woman commented on our beautiful child. She then looked at me, apparently just post-partum, and commented on how well I looked after the pregnancy. I thanked her and turned to find my partner rolling her eyes. I thoroughly enjoyed these mistaken attributions when they came and rarely corrected their assumptions. I felt as if I were given glimpses of the inner world of a club to which I had a birthright, but I had not yet been initiated. I worked very hard to achieve status to belong to that club. My partner breast-fed, so the first few days there was little direct mothering I could do for him, although I offered as much support to my partner as possible. Soon, however, my two weeks off were over and the separation in our roles intensified over the first six months. Although I took one day a week off from the time of his birth and actually spent more time with the children than my partner, the primary attachment to his biological mother remained clear.

I remember being aware of a strong identification with feelings described to me by the fathers I saw in my practice who had had their first child. I felt isolated, lonely and helpless at times. These feelings mingled with joy and elation that I had a dream come true. Somehow, however, I felt more like an observer of my dream than a participant.

I recognized jealousy and envy, and a strong desire to have my own biological child. Not all second mothers feel this way. I also became acutely aware of how parenting triggers narcissism and how this became more preoccupying for me due to my grief over my own mother’s death. I believe all

these feelings can mold our relationships with our own children in ways we do not desire if we cannot separate our own narcissistic needs from our roles as parents.

In time, my grief made room for another little person to assert himself. We began to find each other. I became, in my mind, one of his generic “mamas”. All grown women were “mama” to him and he was surrounded by women who sought the job. As mentioned earlier, my son’s first caregiver was his “amma” which is Icelandic for grandmother. Our closest lesbian friends slipped easily into the roles of Godmothers as they, too, sought to become parents. My son was the first among four children who would eventually be born to these four mothers.

I struggled with the dilution of my role, but worked hard to dispel the injuries to my mothering self-esteem and decided that my son would eventually tell me who I was to him.

I realized in time that my early support role to the relationship between my partner and my son would replay itself throughout our lives. I recognized the value of this role to him and them. My own needs were overcome by my acceptance of the separation between my “fantasy” infant-mother relationship and the real relationship that my son most needed with me. This was not mothering as I imagined it, or fathering as I understood it to be. I was, however, clearly a parent.

The efforts I was making to become pregnant during the first years of my son’s life only intensified my grief and my role separation. After two years of recurrent loss, I recognized that the needs of my son outweighed the cost of the drive to seek that fantasy infant. I decided on an end point to this struggle with relief. We agreed that after two more cycles of alternative insemination, my partner and I would switch roles and she would try to get pregnant again. I became pregnant on the next cycle.

Being a biological parent started for me even before conception with the choice of sperm donor, through the insemination process, and right into the moment of conception. I “knew” this baby was a girl and noted all kinds of attributions during the pregnancy that she would come to dispel. I believe I even made attributions to the eggs I saw on ultrasound.

At 14 weeks, I felt my daughter move inside me. Already I knew my relationship to her would begin differently than my relationship to my son. The baby was “real” far more immediately as I began to accept the responsibility of decision-making, even before she was born.

The new baby also changed my relationship with my son. It drove my partner and my son more intensely together. At the same time, he had a separation from his nanny/grandmother as he entered day care.

The breast-feeding, the nights awake with an asthmatic infant, and the maternity leave, all contributed to the early primary bond between myself and the infant. My son was apparently quite angry at me and this new little baby, and he let me know it regularly. Although his anger made me vigilant about the

baby, it taught me a little bit about my role in his life as well.

It took a few months for life to settle into a routine again, but eventually the members of this family began to find their places and their attachments. Each individual as they assert their personality has subtly changed roles in relation to each other. It has become more like a square-dance with four main dancers, and various others coming and going within the main circle. Sometimes the partners switch depending on the children's needs at any point. As time goes on, the children will move further from the original partner to find their own partners, and the dance will go on.

The main lesson for me has been around the development of parenting identity. A parent-child relationship is directed by many internal and external factors in both parent and child. Like a dance, the relationship needs to allow for both dancers to express their style and creativity. I believe my role as second mother to my son taught me so much more about this as our rhythm was not as easy to find. I was struggling to lead and offering a role to him which he did not really need. When I began to let go of my own pre-assumptions about what I should be doing or feeling as a mother, it became easier to find his rhythm and fit into his world. It became clear early on that my internal preoccupation with loss made little room for what could be created.