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My Son the Feminist, A First-Rate Mom

This paper traces the years I spent rearing my son in a manner that was at odds with the prevailing views at the time for I discovered that boys suffered from social constraints as well as girls. My son was born when I was in my early twenties and the women's movement was in its very beginning. I wanted to bring him up to develop traits he displayed that were social taboo for boys at the time, a soft-hearted disposition and a range of interests that didn't include sports. Even today, men who do not display machismo are often viewed as "wimps." I believed that an important part of feminism was allowing men the options some of them enjoy today such as expressing affection rather than insisting that they follow the prevailing views of what men should be. Providing outlets for my son's interests in music and performance was a counterpart to helping validate his extracurricular activities in his school. The feminist movement happened to coincide with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, but I had always believed that feminism and developing a social conscience were inextricably tied together. As a result, I included my son in my social activism as well as exposing him to pressing political issues. Today, my grown son has become a wonderful "mom" and a supportive husband as well as a person who displays a deep concern for justice. In his work he has always displayed the qualities of a peacemaker, a trait still at odds with the prevailing view of male identity.

I am watching my son on a conference call in his home, mike under his chin, earpieces firmly attached. But that is not all he is doing. He also happens to be changing his baby daughter's very full diaper at the same time. Pierre, who is one of the top radio executives in the country, is doing what women have been doing for millennia—multi-tasking.

He is the one who bathes both daughters in the evening, still with his cell phone at hand because his obstetrician wife cannot predict her hours as she's on

call so often and periodically spends nights at the hospital. Pierre has more flexibility. He is sometimes able to work at home or come home early and head for his study late at night after the girls are in bed, just as I did when he was a child. He happens to be very proud of his wife's achievements as an endocrinologist and physician and does everything he can to support her career. They are a team, holding down two demanding jobs and parenting a one and a half year old and a two and a half year old daughters. Even at her young age, the oldest knows her mommy, "takes care of babies and ladies."

My son was born when I was in my early 20s and the women's movement was in its very beginning. I wanted to bring him up to honor all sides of his personality because he happened to have qualities that I cherished despite being social taboo for boys at the time, a soft-hearted disposition and a range of interests that didn't include sports. Even today, men who do not display machismo are often viewed as "wimps." I believed that an important part of feminism was allowing men the options some of them enjoy today such as expressing affection rather than insisting that they follow the prevailing views of what men should be. I imparted these values to Pierre by sharing my life with him as a pioneer feminist in a small corner of the world as well as by being very involved in his educational environment.

I began studying for a doctorate in Political Science when women were a rarity in that field and especially in public discourse. I was the youngest of three women at Harvard's graduate program in Political Science, fending off the sexual overtures of some my professors and fellow students even though I was married. I wrote my doctoral thesis when Pierre was just a baby, working at the library after he was in bed because we couldn't afford a sitter at the time.

As a tiny child, Pierre learned the meaning of the word "fesis" (thesis) as we discussed my progress at home. He attended my graduation with my proud husband, which happened to be the first time women were allowed to participate instead of marching separately at Radcliffe some blocks away. I was very pregnant with my daughter at the ceremony and like to think that the two of us broke down the barriers to women.

After that, I became a stay-at-home wife and mom as was typical of so many young married women. Then I read Betty Friedan's landmark work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1965) identifying "The problem that has no name" (utter boredom in simply keeping house), and found my own situation in our dull suburban town in her book. It was one of the many motives that propelled me to begin teaching political science at a small women's college.

Before the children were old enough to attend school, I arranged to teach my courses in the mornings so I could spend time with my children in the afternoons. I insisted on paying our nanny three times as much as the going rate because I felt that she too was a career woman balancing family and work. But I could only afford her a few hours a day and that meant putting in long hours to prepare my courses after the children were asleep.

At the time, the women in my neighborhood kept busy going to sales and

having coffee together. They all kept telling me “I love my children,” as if I had abandoned mine to a cruel fate by picking up my briefcase and heading off to work every morning. That I didn’t fit the social pattern at the time puzzled my son when he was a little boy. “Why don’t you stay home and play cards like the other mothers?” he asked me when he was eight years old. But instead of saying something wise, I just snorted.

I devote this article to my son rather than my daughter because she too discovered sexism and the woman’s movement on her own. She came into my study when she was only five and cried, “Oh, I’ll never be able to become a priest.” I did bring both of my children up as Catholics although it is a particularly sexist religion simply because that was my heritage. However, I took over the task of teaching their Sunday school classes to prevent them from being subjected to the church’s peculiar views on women and also to expose them to different religions. When my son was an adolescent, at a time when the church as so many other faiths still believed that theirs was the one and only truth, the class attended Seder suppers, heard Quakers speak and explored different views. My daughter still remembers how I fought to have girls to serve on the altar when only boys were allowed in that role and how I organized the mothers who were teaching classes as volunteers to support that cause. Today of course, there are women Eucharistic Ministers and altar girls but still no women priests.

After his confirmation, my son told me that he no longer wished to be a Catholic. I supported him wholeheartedly. He happens to be a person with a wonderful sense of humour. Before confirmation, he kept saying he would wear a tee-shirt underneath his jacket with the words “I am a Jew,” scrawled in bold letters and that he would fling it open at the moment of confirmation. And instead of choosing a saint’s name as his confirmation name, he wanted to pick “Clint,” the hero in one of his favorite spy novels.

I felt that by the time my children were teenagers, they could certainly make their own choices about religion. I myself left the Catholic Church after the children were confirmed, considering my duty done and preferring to express my spirituality outside of the bounds of organized religion.

For me, feminism and social awareness go hand in hand as they did when I was bringing up my children in the late 60s and 70s when both the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement gained public notoriety. Thus, when Pierre was a small child, I began bringing him to events at the college where I taught, including an evening session with the fiery Rap Brown. I gave him a children’s book about Martin Luther King hoping to raise his social conscience and, in fact, it moved him deeply. Did my views on civil rights and my volunteer work teaching in the projects have anything to do with Pierre’s choice of moving into an African-American dorm when he attended college and defusing racial conflicts at the radio station there? (He told me that when he would sit down to lunch at an all black table, one young man would always quip, “There goes the neighbourhood.”) I don’t really know, but both children heard

my political views loud and clear over our dinner table discussions that were always peppered with healthy debate. More than likely, this is why Pierre is quiet about his political opinions.

I must add that my French husband was also a very different role model from the typical neighborhood Dad. He helped me clean the house on weekends and spent his free time wiring the house, taking movies and photographs of the children and going on family outings. Unlike other fathers, he openly expressed affection for our son and daughter. Added to that, we were not a family who followed sports events although once we did take Pierre to see a Red Sox game.

But at that time and unfortunately still today, there was a view that reason and emotions are at war with each other. Women were branded as emotional, and therefore less competent while men were considered reasonable, a conflict that is disproved time and time again, for these actually enhance each other.

This was more than a generation before Sara Ruddick's groundbreaking work *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989). When I read it, I felt vindicated for all the unspoken views I held about mothering and how much analytical decision-making occurs hourly while parenting. I was not only *thinking* about Pierre's welfare and development. I was also moving against the mores of the times in so doing as well as in my professional life, for teaching Political Science was still an all male preserve. In the 60s and 70s, intellectual challenge was for men. Emotion was a dirty word, especially in my chosen field; it was *subjective* while topics such as Multiple Independently Targeted Missiles or MIRVs to defend national security, which actually helped spiral the arms race, were *objective*. Mothering was viewed as related to *housework*, a female preserve of washing up, cooking and other purely *physical chores*.

Since I mothered such a long time ago, I can look back over this period and not only see the results of my efforts, but their multifaceted character. For me, feminist mothering meant transmitting a sense of social obligation to my children, challenging some of the pervasive values during that period, analytical thinking and wrestling with love and overwhelming responsibility. I believe it takes an uncommon amount of courage. It is a demanding role that can affect society and international relations. The way we mother has results that go far beyond family and local community as many activist moms have revealed time and time again.

That such views about the value of women and their particular attributes are still not widely accepted was reflected in an essay by the popular *New York Times* columnist David Brooks last October 2005. He wrote that because girls are outperforming boys in education, school curriculums should include more books about *combat* to better attract male attention. He argued that society needs to shift focus from feminine equality to masculine equality, but he failed to understand that feminism could contribute much to alleviate our fraught international and national political problems. Nor did he seem to realize how expanding opportunities for women do not imply that men will suffer as many

men such as him frequently allege. Society does benefit when both men and women are able to pursue their interests and to choose their careers regardless of what the prevailing narrow images of what it means to be a man or a woman.

We are currently going through a phase of celebrating machismo in this country just when I thought it had not perhaps disappeared, but at least lessened in importance. However, it is a strand in our culture that surfaces when our government happens to be in the throes of political difficulties. It was very pervasive when Pierre was a child and since he had neither the inclination nor the personality to adopt that model, I fought hard for his integrity.

My first battle with my son's school on this very issue occurred when he was in kindergarten and was interested in drawing and dance. I noticed he would have inexplicable tantrums when he returned from school and I went to visit his teacher. "He refuses to play ball and to learn how to weave as a way of studying cause and effect," his battle-ax of a teacher pronounced. I then went to see the principal who was very understanding and sighed, "I know how she is, but she has tenure." He supported my decision to withdraw Pierre from the last months of the school year when he played happily at home. (I had taught him how to read and write.) However, unfortunately, that episode ended his interest in drawing and painting.

But I must admit I tried to push some of my own views on him on occasion. Sometimes they took hold. Other times they had hilarious consequences. I forbade him to have guns like the other children when he was young so he simply picked up sticks and cried, "bang, bang." I gave him a doll when our daughter was born, telling him, "This is your baby," only to see him fling it down the stairs. A propos of the guns, I once found an article in his room when he was only nine years old with the headline, "How To Tell Your Parents You Want to Join the Army."

Because my son did not have an aggressive bent and tended to pursue his own way as he was growing up, I found myself bucking both school and neighborhood to support his interests on an ongoing basis. "You're trying to protect him!" an outraged neighbor exclaimed when she learned that I had complained to the principal about a classmate beating him up in the playground. I didn't say anything, but I did think, "That's what mothers are supposed to do."

I found myself continually supporting my son against the prevailing view of the typical boy proving himself through physical prowess and conflict. Pierre hated sports and loved music, so we bought him a trumpet when he was nine years old. His fifth grade teacher complained to me that he turned down the position of first trumpet, "He's not competitive," she lectured me as if somehow I had failed. "He will stay on second trumpet," I replied. When the neighbourhood children started to quarrel over a ball game they were playing in the dead end circle where we lived, Pierre would simply step inside the house.

Pierre was always brimming with interests. First it was dinosaurs, first aid, airplanes and flight, followed by the history of World War I and James Bond

movies. When he became 11 and 12 years old, music became a passion and a constant in his life. He also loved small children and the neighbourhood kids were continually following him around. He began to babysit for a little boy that lived down the street from us at a time when this was regarded as girls' work.

Throughout his years at home, my son both observed and participated in my life as a woman handling many projects at once; childrearing, teaching, volunteer work and writing. Our home was always filled with the neighborhood children and I would take care for youngsters who needed help over the years, including a neighbor's four year-old daughter whose mother became ill. My son was always the one who jumped in to help out. The little girl happily rode Pierre's shoulders while she spent her days at our home until her mother was able to recover from her illness. When a group of friends and I sponsored Lao refugee families, resettling them in the area, Pierre offered to give the children magic shows during the holidays. I also took in a Hispanic boy from the inner city when Pierre was eight years old. He was Pierre's age and spent many summers and holidays at our home where he played happily with our children.

Now, when I visit Pierre and his family, I often find a child named Alex who lives in a housing project, sound asleep on the living room couch or with Pierre in the kitchen while he teaches him cooking. Alex is one of the children Pierre used to work with at the Birch Camp where he was a counselor there during his summers. He has become an important part of Pierre's life for the past five or six years.

By the time he was in the middle school, Pierre had a new vision of his mother. When he brought friends home, he would take them to my study and tell them with pride, "My mother is a writer."

He played the trumpet in the jazz band at middle school and started a career as a part time magician with John, his best friend. He and John had business cards made with the proud name of "The Wizards of Wellesley." I drove them to all their gigs and waited for them while sitting in the car and grading papers. Once when they were performing at a very posh house, the mother invited me in and promptly ushered me to the cloakroom where I worked on a pile of children's coats, fuming inside.

Pierre was terrific at drawing children into the excitement of the show, invoking much audience participation. My mother, his beloved grandmother, took him once to Tannen's, New York's biggest magic equipment store off Times Square. I have to add that my glamorous mother was a fashion designer and a vice president of a company that produced dresses for catalogues. She certainly gave him a different view of the roles women could play during that period. He spent much time with her in New York City going to the circus, to museums and taking in a city he grew to love.

We decided to send Pierre to a private school when our local public high school lost its accreditation. I sent him to visit several schools and he balked at most of them until we found one that was neither high-powered, nor "alternative," nor very *Yankee* for we live in New England and despite the cultural

diversity, the Anglo-Saxon model still prevails there. He promptly won an art scholarship, very unusual for a boy at the time, by giving a magic show to a highly entertained board of directors of the school.

That is where he discovered his grand passion for there was a tiny radio station in the basement of one of the school buildings. Pierre soon became the station manager and his many talents of entrepreneur, peacemaker, and communicator flowered. He managed to settle a dispute with the local public high school over the allocation of air space by training the youngsters from that high school in station management and including them in his radio programs. When I was driving from the college to pick him up at school, I could hear his voice wafting from WRSB, the school ten-watt radio station that had a range of only ten miles.

When he was a freshman the question of sports reared up again. Pierre had the French gene of civil disobedience and would put on his sports uniform, join the group and then slip out of the back door and into the radio station. When it came time to award letters, Pierre felt that he had really tried at times and told me he so wished he could have one. I drove up to visit the coach, reminding him that he too had a son and asking him how would he feel if his son were denied a letter. The confused man backed away and Pierre got his letter. His best friend was in on that rather heated discussion and I heard him say, "Gee Pierre, your Ma is really something!" Despite the letter, Pierre soon lost interest because the radio station consumed him thoroughly.

At the age of 14, he took the subway into Boston and took an exam for a third class radio operator license. Soon after, I persuaded one of my students whose boyfriend was in radio to take Pierre as an intern. From emptying trash baskets, Pierre soon moved to operate the production board at WITS, the Voice of the Red Sox and he made friends there with some of the big radio personalities, friendships he maintains to this day.

Pierre was clearly on a very different track from most of the boys at school. He did have close friends who were following their own interests, a young man who seemed to live in the computer center and another youngster who had a knack for tapping into the principal's phone line so that the radio station could make calls to record companies nationwide and request free records as if WRSB were a commercial radio station.

Meanwhile, Pierre was participating in my life as a professor in an all male field by not only occasionally coming to work with me, but also by listening at the dinner table as I recounted what my misogynous department chairman was doing to undermine me because I had the nerve to publish and attract more students to my classes than he did. That man's name became a big part of our family discussions.

Those conversations had a big effect on Pierre. He does have teaching in his blood, but instead chose a career as a radio- marketing executive where listening to and working with customers was another form of teaching. It also made him aware of the difficulties women in radio that was also then a

predominantly male field.

That awareness stayed with him. Two years ago, we flew to Washington D.C. to attend an event where Pierre was presented with the annual achievement award from the Association of Women in Radio and Television. My husband, Pierre and a member of Pierre's staff were the only men present in a very crowded hotel ballroom. After the speeches and program were finished, I was surrounded by a group of women who wanted to tell me how much they appreciated his efforts. Pierre has spent years as the only male member on the AWRT board of directors, contributing his experience and his industry wide connections.

During that same period *Fortune Magazine* listed Pierre's company as one of the best places for women to work. He consistently hires and trains young women and has been richly rewarded for they have added much energy and talent to the company. He has arranged part time work for new moms and has made certain that bright young women are not only given responsibility but also influential positions.

Reciprocity between us has also become a happy and unexpected result of Pierre's feminist upbringing although it is also due in large part to his inherent generosity. He has supported my strong interest in writing about women and human rights in many ways. When I flew to Argentina in 1990 to interview the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (whose children were "disappeared" under the military junta) for a book I planned to write, Pierre gave me a frequent flyer ticket on business class so I could arrive in Buenos Aires less fatigued. And when I returned, he had a limousine waiting for me at the airport that took me to his New York apartment where I could spend the night and break the long flight before returning home.

By that time, even though Pierre was still a young man, he held a top position in a radio marketing company where he opened up new markets in Europe for the company. As a result his travels earned him many free airline miles.

When my book on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was published in 1994, I arranged for two of the Mothers to come visit Brandeis University where I am a Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center. Pierre took two days off from work. He flew to Boston to ferry the Mothers around and help me out, for I had them stay in our home where they would be more comfortable. He also took them out to lunch and to see the sights in our city as a treat and they were delighted with his company and their experience.

Two years later, I was embarked on yet another project on women and human rights. I wanted to have an interview with Hanan Ashrawi, a top political Palestinian leader who had taken part in the negotiations leading up to the Oslo Peace Accords. Not only was she interested in promoting the rights of her own people, but also at the time she was endeavoring to improve relations with the Israelis. She was staying in Washington D.C. for just a few days to meet with government officials. With much effort, I managed to schedule a 45-

minute interview with her. Pierre booked a room for me in the same hotel where she was residing so that I could have easy access to her. He didn't want me to be stuck in traffic and lose my chance to connect with Ms. Ashrawi on the way to her hotel.

I return to the first image of Pierre as father and husband, holding his youngest daughter on his hip while he loads the washing machine, or getting up at night to feed her and loving every minute of it although both he and his wife are perpetually exhausted. Just recently, I read an article in the Business section of the *New York Times* about the president of an advertising company who claimed that there were no women in top positions in his company because they were better at nurturing than at managing, as if child rearing somehow dulled the brain. He was fired for his remarks, but I wish he could learn from Pierre and other men like him.

Pierre is not only supportive of women's human rights and their ability to chose in their public lives, but also in their private lives. After he married, his wife Mary wanted to wait to have children until she was established in her profession as an OBGYN. Pierre always dreamed of being a father but he honoured Mary's needs and she provided him with much loving support in his work. Before the children came, Pierre spent his vacations volunteering as a counselor at the Birch Camp for HIV positive children where he met Alex when he was a little boy. In his work as in his roles as a volunteer, parent and husband, Pierre has always shown a profound compassion, a quality that is absent from past and contemporary views of what constitutes male strength.

I think of just one of many instances where he was moved by a deep compassion. As he was walking back to his apartment in the city one late afternoon, a homeless woman with two children came up to him and told him of their hunger. He took them up to his bachelor pad where he had little to eat and where he learned that the woman had been evicted from her apartment because she couldn't pay the rent. Pierre called up the landlord, advanced the rent and went to an ATM machine to give her cash so they could buy groceries and return to their home.

In the United States, the male image of aggressiveness and toughness is supposed to represent strength. Women know that strength is a matter of combining mind and heart, of being able to acknowledge our shortcomings and vulnerabilities as well as honoring cooperation and mutual support. It is women who care about peace in the world and who organized a Million Mom March Against Guns in Washington D.C. a few years ago. I tried to impart this version of strength to Pierre as he was growing up, and he not only responded in his many faceted life, he has become a peacemaker at work and within both of his extended families.

While Pierre and I have always had a deep bond, he had his own strong personality and views. I can attest that he has a tact his mother sometimes lacks for I still have no compunction about proclaiming my political views. He enjoyed teasing and miming me when he was growing up. "Political Science,"

he would thunder when he was a teenager, furrowing his brow and looking deeply thoughtful. I taught international relations and Pierre would make fun of me by pretending I was reeling through a war-torn country while he would watch me cook dinner. He still has a wonderful perspective. Although he is hard working, ambitious and eagerly takes on perhaps too much responsibility, he doesn't take himself too seriously. Mostly he talks about his little girls and their progress, just like a proud Mom. It is a source of great satisfaction for me to see how feminist values inform the many aspects of his very rich life.

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