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Williamsburg Unitarians Universalists
Fatherhood 2.0

Until March 3, 2002, there were no children in my life story line. I had just finished my Ph.D. in African History at Howard University and had accepted a plum position as an Assistant Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis, a school consistently ranked in the top ten nationally. Landing this job seemed to validate the claims of my mentors that I was a 'rising star' in the field. The future was bright and clear: I would write books, teach students, travel to South Africa to do research every year, buy a house, a car and pick up a wife somewhere along the way.

On March 3, 2002, a former lover called to tell me I was going to be a father. Our relationship had ended-or so we thought-several weeks ago in a blizzard of bitter recriminations and it seemed very likely that we would never see each other again. Now this. A father? I had barely known my own father, who slipped into heroin addiction while my fifteen-year old mother was pregnant. He later died of AIDS, racked with guilt that he had not been there for me. My stepfather, an immigrant from the Caribbean island of Dominica, was the strong, silent type who brought home the bacon but wouldn't cook it. For him, fatherhood meant earning enough money to feed, clothe and house me, my infant sister and three stepbrothers and **that** job ended at 5 p.m. He retreated to their master suite to shower, don his velvet red robe, smoke his pipe, sip a cold beer, watch the Lakers fast-break over some overmatched opponent and wait for my mother's dinner call. With my mother overwhelmed with a full-time job and nursing school, I became a primary caregiver to my young sister, clothing, cooking, cleaning and changing some of

the nastiest diapers on God's green earth. After the initial shock wore off-a process that lasted several days, if not weeks-I became confident that I would meet the requirements of fatherhood. In this case, with me in St. Louis and the mother of my child finishing her studies in this region, fatherhood meant writing a check once a month, hopping a plane twice a month and calling three times a week. My 1-2-3 economic model of fatherhood would be a minor speed bump on the way to academic stardom.

Not long after my daughter Tandi was born, it became clear that I needed to do more than write checks, hop planes and dial a number. There were serious health issues and I knew that I would have to seek primary custody of my daughter. Well-meaning lawyers, social workers and other professionals familiar with family court proceedings in this area advised me that I had about a 5% chance of winning. Fathers did not win custody of children often, particularly if that child was very young, the same gender as her mother and I was in St. Louis. One lawyer, however, laid out a comprehensive plan that could maximize my chances but I had now reached a fork in the road. I believe that there are a precious few times in our lives when we face critical decisions to go in one direction or the other where the stakes are so high that may have life or death consequences. Standing at that fork in the road, I could see that one path featured an ascending academic career interrupted briefly by plane hopping and check writing. The other path required about \$20,000 in legal fees, suddenly take leave of my fiancée for a year, leave my job in St. Louis without a job here, convince her to leave a good job in St. Louis and move myself to Virginia to go through the custody case. It was an easy choice.

During the custody battle, I encountered a fair amount of gender prejudice along

the way. The other side floated theories that I only wanted custody to avoid paying child support or that my mother was really the one who wanted to raise Tandi and I, as the father, was the vehicle for her to achieve this ambition. I was asked time and again whether I had a wife, implying that only a woman could capably raise a child, particularly a daughter. I was advised to take parenting classes, where I re-learned many of the skills learned in my teenage years when I was caring for my sister. I had to demonstrate over and over again that I could cook, clean and care for my daughter and I noticed that, whatever other issues affected my child's mother, it seemed to be assumed that she, as a woman, was hardwired to raise children. Nevertheless, I persisted and finally won.

I now know very clearly that fatherhood is about building emotional intimacy with my daughter, not just paying the bills. Raising my daughter has been the best thing that has ever happened to me and the best, most important thing that I have ever done and ever will do in my life. I do think that my victory is indicative of some progress in our society about gender norms. Don't get me wrong, diaper changing stations in public restrooms are almost always in women's not men's rooms, other mom's ask if they can call my wife to schedule a play date and there are still the occasional odd looks from people apparently not used to seeing a Dad in a close, loving relationship with his daughter. But I do think that our household signals a seismic shift in how many fathers relate to their children. In our household, I am the primary caregiver, I am the one who makes professional sacrifices in the interest of child-rearing, I am who gets up early to cook breakfast, I am the one who juggles Tandi's school matters, dance and swimming classes, the ubiquitous birthday parties and play dates, and I am the one who stays home

with Tandi while my wife enjoys an occasional night out with her girlfriends. My wife is the one who can fix anything around the house, who gets off work late and who unwinds from a long day with minimal child rearing responsibilities. This arrangement works very well for us and we know that Tandi will grow up having a vastly different view of parenthood than either of us did. In this house, fatherhood does not end at 5 p.m. Me and the many other active dads that I see all around me can bring home the bacon *and* cook it too!