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Mother's Day Dads

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Another Mother's Day will soon be upon us, and Jack, Mona and I will celebrate by preparing our annual Mother's Day brunch. We'll arrange warm bagels in baskets and thinly sliced red onions and tomatoes on glass plates we purchased at an auction years ago and use only on special occasions. The baskets of bagels and plates of onions and tomatoes will be placed on a pastel colored table cloth, along with a platter of lox, several flavors of cream cheese, whipped butter, assorted jams, fresh fruit salad tossed with crushed walnuts in a pottery bowl, an Entenmann's Ultimate Crumb Cake and a pitcher of chilled orange juice. These treats will circle a hub of fresh picked daffodils, tulips and hyacinths and be framed by an arc of silverware, linen napkins, china lunch plates, cups and saucers.

How Jack and I, two gay dads, have become Mother's Day mavens is one of life's little ironies; we have assumed this role every second Sunday in May, for the past five years. Jack's mother and sister make their annual trek from Albany to Syracuse. My mother, who lives with us, turns off *Hello Dolly*, *Funny Girl* or whatever Streisand musical video she happens to be watching at the time and joins us in the kitchen. Her video addiction is having a curious effect on Mona's cultural literacy. From occasionally peeking into her grandmother's room to check out that day's top pics, Mona has become quite precocious with movie trivia.

Once, in Barnes & Noble, an apparently stunned cashier in the music department approached Jack and me and asked if Mona was our daughter. She proceeded to inform us that Mona had inquired as to whose picture was on the cover of a particular CD. The cashier had replied that it was a picture of Frank Sinatra. Mona, a bit perplexed, responded, "Oh I thought it was Nathan Detroit." Her response so impressed the cashier that she had to meet this child's parents. I guess Nathan Detroit is the character Frank Sinatra played in the movie *Guys and Dolls*. Now I know what this cashier was thinking. *Little girl. Two dads. Of course she knows who Nathan Detroit is.* But Jack and I didn't have a clue. See how stereotypes are reinforced? What the woman didn't know was that Mona also lives with a 94-year-old guardian of Hollywood musicals.

Aside from Mona's paternal and paternal grandmothers and Aunt Helene, her three godmothers - Sue, Sharon and Kate - also join us for brunch. When Mona was christened, we asked three long-time and intimate friends to be her godmothers. We figured she had enough fathers, and a little parity was called for. All kidding aside, these women were very important in our lives, and we wanted them to be there for our daughter. They each have been and continue to be a vital part of our family. Her Godmother Kate's two children, Ana and Mario, are also our godchildren. Our guest list is growing; last year we included our littlest godson's mom and her new partner. This annual event has become a grand tradition, rivaled only by Hyacinth's candle light soirées (for our British comedy fans).

Choosing three godmothers, hosting an annual Mother's Day brunch and other efforts Jack and I make to foster enduring relationships between Mona and the women who love her are in the spirit of affirmation, not compensation. However, I don't wish to minimize the challenges a child faces when she or he doesn't have a mother in the house, regardless of whether or not there are one or two dads, straight or gay. Just compare Mother's Day cards to Father's Day cards. There's an overwhelming sense of reverence and adoration for mothers as compared to fathers. Pervasive images of "mother" as the irreplaceable heart of family may have served to control or at least confine the role of women, but from a child's perspective these images are poignant and perpetuate an ideal that true family love is impossible without a mother.

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I remember kneeling with Mona at her bedside, saying prayers; she was about four at the time. We began *Our Father*... It struck me as a teachable moment. "You know Mona, just because we say *Our Father who art in heaven* doesn't mean that God is a man. We could just as easily say *Our Mother who art in heaven*." Mona's resistance to my suggestion trumped my feminist critique of the Lord's Prayer. As I persisted, Mona objected with, "I want God to be a Father! I'm sick of everything being Mother, Mother, Mother!"

Last December, a novelty store in Syracuse that specialized in black figurines was going out of business. Mona and I were browsing. She was purchasing Christmas gifts and spotted one of Thomas Blackshear's *Ebony Visions*. It's a stunning cast of a mythical African man sitting on a rock, holding a golden spear in his left hand, his large white wings extending over two young African children, a girl and a boy. I asked Mona if she liked it. She said, "Yes, because the father is sheltering the children." I drove back to the store later that day, and *Under The Shelter of His Wing* became Mona's Kwanza gift from her two fathers. The name of the piece was an added surprise.

It took work for Mona to own her love of fathers as nurturers. There were many messages that shook her views of our family and its worth. At times other people's prejudices took its toll on our resilient little girl. During more challenging conversations she'd shed tears, but there was one conversation I especially remember – not so much for what was said but for what I realized. Mona wasn't shedding tears of longing; they were tears of frustration. She knew her family was wonderful and was horribly frustrated by those who were critical and cruel. It wasn't that she wanted something she didn't have; it was that, when dealing with others, it would just be easier to be part of a like race, straight, birth family. That was the first time I thought of something that I've said to her many times since: "Easier does not mean better." Nothing profound, but it seemed to help.

Recently Mona was being difficult for one of the many reasons that 9-year-olds can be difficult. She knew that her behavior had been unreasonable and mentioned that my life would probably be easier without her. Rather than play the martyr, I agreed. "Yes, my life probably would be easier without a 9-year-old daughter, or without a same-sex partner, or without any relationship that demands I be accountable, but it wouldn't be better." Mona is a perceptive child; she knows that our being a family does not make life easy. But she also knows that "easy" is not the goal.

Maybe our Mother's Day brunches do include a pinch of compensation, but it's mixed with a whole bunch of love for the women in our lives. And, in a way, it's also a self-tribute. As Mona's parents, Jack and I draw from every part of ourselves, be it masculine or feminine and everything in between, to love and support our daughter. Have a happy Mother's Day Jack; I know you wish the same for me, as we both do for all mothers - regardless of gender.