



Jess Carfagnini, "Angry Self-Portrait," acrylic on canvas, 9" x 14", 2001.

Queer Parenting in the New Millennium

Resisting Normal

RACHEL EPSTEIN

Ce texte est une réflexion sur 15 ans de recherche, d'éducation, d'activisme et d'organisations communautaires sur le rôle des parents « queer ». Au Canada en 2005 il y a de quoi pavoiser parce qu'il nous faut reconnaître notre position dans le débat actuel et les réalités du mariage homosexuel. Comment devons-nous célébrer nos gains et notre créativité dans la façon de fonder une famille dans les communautés LGBTQT sans renier notre sexualité ou créer des hiérarchies normatives? Comment, comme parents, pouvons-nous critiquer les versions normalisées de la famille? Comment envisager ces questions quand on veut protéger nos enfants et leur offrir le meilleur?

Almost ten years ago I wrote an article suggesting the importance of paying attention to the complexity of the experience of lesbian parents and their children in an effort to avoid creating a community “blueprint” of how our families should be or look. More and more “out” lesbians were choosing to bring children into their lives, and I was suggesting that paying close attention to our daily experiences, to our emotions, to our desires, and to the ways our beliefs and life experiences about biology, blood, parenting, family, and childhood impact the choices we make about how and with whom we parent—might help us avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach to the whole enterprise.

Now, in 2005, I’m taking the opportunity to reflect back on almost 15 years of education, activism, and organizing related to queer parenting, and, wouldn’t you know it, raising similar questions. In doing so, I want to do two things. I want to acknowledge and celebrate the changes that have taken place over the past 20 years in relation to queer parenting; and, secondly, raise some questions about the current political context within which we are parenting—in particular, the debate about and realities of same-sex marriage. I worry that the fact that same-sex marriage is almost universally available in Canada¹ might be creating another “blueprint,” a framework that

privileges one way of parenting over another, that normalizes one way of parenting and marginalizes others. I worry that the pressures we experience as queer parents, pressures that are sometimes punitive, severe, and damaging to us and to our children, might lead us to embrace an institution that ultimately does not work in our best interests—a social institution that is about the regulation of sexuality, ours and that of other sex and gender outsiders. I want to urge that we not collude with the disavowal of sexuality from our identities as queers and particularly from our identities as queer parents—hard as this may be sometimes in our desire to keep our children safe and well-protected. Really I’m raising questions about how we maintain and build on the radical history we have inherited as sex and gender outsiders, as lesbians, as gay men, as bisexuals, as transsexual and transgender people, as queer people ... and as parents.

As queer parents we have historically faced many pressures; many of us gave up our sense of entitlement to have children when we “came out,” gays and lesbians have had children taken away from them, some of us have not been able to be out to our children, some of us have been disowned by our families when we had children. And our children continue to feel the social stigma attached to our sexualities. They suffer because of the ways our identities have been squashed, shamed, and delegitimized. And of course we want to love and protect them, while teaching them to face difficulties and fears with steadiness. So what does it mean, in the context of parenting, in the context of loving and aching to protect our children as much as we possibly can, to question the ways that the pressures we experience can lead us to desire “normal.” “Normal,” I would suggest, is not always better—for us, or for our children.

In Canada we have much to celebrate on the queer parenting front. For me personally, the birth of my daughter in 1992, at a home birth surrounded by a dozen close friends/family, was a high point in my life. Since then

I have been privileged, through my personal and work life, to have been closely connected to hundreds of queer parents, prospective parents, and families. I have had the benefits of an insider's view into many of the joys and challenges, dynamics and dilemmas of queer family life.

I am currently the proud co-parent of a fabulous 13-year-old girl, and step-parent to an equally fabulous boy who just turned 20. In 1992 I began doing research on lesbian parenting, and my research followed my life. When I was pregnant I interviewed lesbian couples about the day-to-day organization of their lives. When someone

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close to me was denied access to a child as a non-biological parent, I interviewed non-biological lesbian parents. When my daughter hit school age, I talked to other queer parents about their experiences with schools; my longstanding admiration of butches led me to write about butch-identified biological mothers. My other hat, as a mediator of interpersonal conflict, led to mediations and planning sessions with queer parents and prospective parents, attempting to work out the inevitable issues that arise whenever two or more people try to do anything together, let alone something as complex as parenting. The aim here is/was to keep people out of messy, painful, and expensive court battles which often result in grief and loss for all. In 1997, Kathi Duncan and I began teaching the Dykes Planning Tykes (DPT) course in Toronto—an eight-week course for queer woman considering parenthood. The course ran first through the Centre for Lesbian and Gay Studies' Queer Exchange, then through the Toronto Women's Bookstore, and in recent years has found a home at the 519 Church St. Community Centre. Through DPT I have watched hundred of babies be born or adopted into and grow up in queer families.

In 2001 I was privileged to be hired by the Family Service Association of Toronto (FSA) to coordinate the LGBT Parenting Network, possibly the first program in Canada to receive funding to provide resources, information and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgender parents, prospective parents and their families. Through the Parenting Network we have been able to develop information brochures and newsletters, and provide training, workshops, and presentations to schools, daycares, public health workers, family resources programs, and other professionals seeking to make their programs more accessible to LGBT families. The Parenting Network, with the 519 Church St. Commu-

nity Centre, a group of dedicated men from the gay community, and Chris Veldhoven, facilitator of the course, developed Daddies & Papas 2B (DP2B), a brother course to DPT, for gay men considering parenthood. We hold social and recreational events and forums like the Queer Parenting Exchange (QPE), a monthly drop-in where queer parents and prospective parents meet informally to talk about things like schools, reproductive technology, dynamics between biological and non-biological parents, families of origin, single parenting, co-parenting, step-parenting, racism and adoption. The QPE has also organized longer, more in-depth events on themes such as dealing with schools, issues for interracial LGBT families, and issues for transsexual and transgender parents and prospective parents—both those who transitioned after having children and those who are considering parenthood post-transition.

The Parenting Network is also part of creating a growing body of research on queer parenting in Canada. Our two current projects involve, with funding from the Wellesley Central Health Corporation, an investigation of the impact of the same-sex marriage debate on children and youth with LGBT parents, and as part of a national SSHRC-funded project on father involvement, a study exploring the barriers/supports experienced by gay fathers. This project is headed up by Scott Duggan, a doctoral candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

While the Parenting Network has been fortunate, at least in the short term, to have been funded, there are also many unfunded, grassroots queer/LGBT parenting groups across the country. In large cities, small towns, and rural communities, queer parents are connecting with one another to exchange information and support. In Montreal, the Lesbian Mothers' Association has close to 900 members and has, on an entirely volunteer basis, provided major leadership to some important legislative and policy struggles, as well as providing social and practical support to its members.

I believe we have much to celebrate on the queer parenting front. Historically, in gay and lesbian communities, "coming out," identifying as other than heterosexual, recognizing one's desire for same-sex relationships, for many meant abandoning the prospect of having children. How many parents grieved when their children "came out" that there would be no grandchildren? How many gay and lesbian-identified people themselves put the thought of raising children out of their consciousness as part of embracing new-found gay communities? While we have to take care not to assume that all queer or gender variant people want to have children, or even want to think about it, developments over the past 20 years have made having children more possible as an option for more people. In both DPT and DP2B we spend time exploring the entitlement, or lack of it, that people feel in their desire to be parents. And that sense

of entitlement is changing. Lesbians have been having children within queer identifications for more than 20 years. For many the question has become not can I have kids, but when do I have kids? Queer family planning is a relatively new phenomenon, and even newer for gay men. The DP2B course has filled to overflowing each time it has run. More and more gay men are choosing to bring children into their lives—through co-parenting, fostering, adoption, and surrogacy.

And, of course, some of the legislative and policy changes of the last decade have made queer parenting easier. It is now possible for lesbian/gay couples to adopt as couples through the Children's Aid Society (CAS). In Toronto the CAS has done much internal educational work to make lesbian/gay adoption more possible, and they regularly place children with same-sex couples. They are also taking steps to process applications by transsexual prospective adoptive parents. Second parent adoption is available to same-sex couples in most provinces and territories (with the exceptions of Nunavut and Prince Edward Island); and in British Columbia, Quebec, and New Brunswick it is possible for lesbian couples to have both people registered as legal parents from the time of a child's birth. While there have recently been some scares about the 2004 *Assisted Human Reproduction Act (AHRA)*, which seemed on first reading to criminalize home insemination (we have since been assured that this is not the government's intent), generally the law seems to be getting better for queer parents in Canada.²

However, things are not all easy. In 2001 a Canadian Leger poll indicated that more than 50 per cent of the Canadian population felt that gays and lesbians should be denied the right to parent. This is a profound statistic. We are parenting in a social climate in which more than half the people around us believe we should not be allowed to be parents. And we are not far historically from the 1970s and 1980s when women were at risk of losing custody of their children in court decisions that found lesbians to be unfit mothers (Pollack). These decisions were based on a number of assumptions/myths about lesbian mothers—myths that are directed, by extension, and often more vehemently, at gay fathers. These "myths" have demonized lesbian/gay parents in popular culture and are deeply embedded in mainstream consciousness. We, and now many heterosexual friends, colleagues, and professional associations, have spent decades rebutting them. They include assumptions that lesbian/gay sexuality is immoral and that lesbians/gay men are promiscuous, sexually mal-adjusted and likely to sexually harm children; children raised in lesbian/gay homes will develop inappropriate gender identities and gender role concepts and behaviours, and may themselves develop a homosexual orientation; healthy child development requires the presence and availability of biological fathers as "male role models" (or in the case of gay fathers, "female role models"); and children raised in lesbian/gay homes will be socially stig-

matized and subjected to ridicule, teasing, and hostility from their peers.

Understandably, given the prejudicial legal climate, especially in the U.S., much of the early research on lesbian parenting focused on rebutting these arguments. Women were at risk of losing their children; the stakes were high. There are now countless studies that "prove" that sexual abusers are not, for the most part, lesbians or gay men but are, in fact, heterosexually identified (Badgley *et al.* cited in O'Brien and Weir 128-29); that there is virtually no difference between the children of lesbians

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and those of heterosexual mothers with regard to gender identity, gender role behaviour, psychopathology, or homosexual orientation (Gibbs; Bozett; Kirkpatrick; Kirkpatrick, Smith and Roy; Golombok, Spencer and Rutter; Mandel, Horvedt and Green; Hoeffler); that lesbians mothers are actually more concerned than heterosexual single mothers with providing opportunities for their children to develop ongoing relationships with men (Kirkpatrick, Smith and Roy) (not to mention the more complex arguments that have been developed about the assumptions embedded in "male/female role model" arguments); and that it is a dangerous, bigotry-fueled argument to suggest that *any* group that experiences systemic oppression should not have children because of the potential emotional damage to the children (O'Brien and Weir; Stacey and Biblarz).

Every workshop I facilitate on issues of lesbian/gay parenting includes an exercise looking at these "myths" or "commonly-held ideas" about queer parenting—and brainstorming about how to talk back to them. I've noticed, though, that the "commonly-held idea" we tend to address least is the one that says "lesbians and gay men are oversexed, all they do is think about sex, talk about sex, write about sex, have sex—how could they ever be decent parents?" Lesbians and gay men who plan to parent get asked, in all seriousness, "But will you have sex in front of the children?"

How do we respond to these assumptions about our supposed obsessions with sex in the context of the questioning of our parenting abilities? I think one way we have responded is by denying or minimizing the sexual aspects of our lives in order to be seen as respectable, responsible, "good" parents—not surprising, given the same-sex marriage debate which has inundated us with media messages about the dangers to children of growing up with lesbian/

gay parents. "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the gays and lesbians with baby carriages" ... goes the argument. Marriage and procreation have been inextricably linked in the debate and the procreation aspect, marked by those who oppose same-sex unions, as a central problem. It's no wonder we feel pushed towards desiring respectability ... our relationships, our families, our rights and desires to have children, are being diminished every day in a very public national debate. So we see things like the article published in the *Globe and Mail* two years ago, which featured a beautiful front-page photograph of a gay

There may be some possibilities created for children in queer households that challenge profoundly entrenched gender dynamics.

man holding a new-born baby. The article, a very sympathetic portrayal of gay men becoming fathers, describes some of the men who are considering parenthood:

... none fits the stereotype of the flamboyant drag queen or promiscuous, muscle-bound, bar-hopping gadabout ... the pair are the image of domestic bliss, as traditional as a couple can be ... they met, fell in love, proposed marriage on bended knee, wear wedding bands on their fingers, bought a house on a leafy street in west-end Toronto and now want to settle down and start a family. "I can't tell you how normal we are. Not all gay people are on Church St. wearing leather in the parade. We're in bed at 10:15 after watching the news, and we go right to sleep. We do everything that other couples do. So why wouldn't we want to have a child?" (Philp F4-F5)

While I understand the desire for respectability, for acceptance by the mainstream, and for the space to be left alone to live our lives, this quotation scares and unsettles me. It scares me because I see the desire to be "normal" taking the form of a distancing from and a pathologizing of significant parts of queer communities. And it unsettles me because I see us desexualizing ourselves in order to be accepted.

Michael Warner, in his book *The Trouble With Normal*, argues persuasively that the mainstream gay/lesbian movement, in response to the historic shame and stigma attached to gay/lesbian sexualities, has moved away from the politics of shame to a desexualized identity politics that claims lesbian/gay identities, but disavows the sexuality that goes with them. In an attempt to create a "respectable, dignified gay community," there is a striving to be seen as "normal." The seeking of "normal," however, means there

has to be the "pathological," the "not normal." The result is a distancing from and a pathologizing of non-normative sexualities—queer or straight. Instead of aiming to create a broad-based movement that claims diverse non-normative sexualities, the mainstream gay/lesbian movement has adopted a stance of "we're gay, but this has nothing to do with sex" (40) and the movement becomes desexualized, with sex and sexuality disavowed as "irrelevant."

The above quotation from the *Globe and Mail* is illustrative of this framework. The author distances the gay fathers she is talking about from the "drag queens, the bar-hopping gadabouts, the promiscuous, the muscle-bound," and the gay fathers themselves distance themselves from those who "wear leather in the parade on Church St." These guys are in bed at 10:15 and "go right to sleep."

Well, of course any parent knows that falling asleep at 10:15 is not unusual, nor is a lack of sex. What's troubling is the striving to be normal and the distancing from the "less desirable" segments of the gay community.

The struggle for same-sex marriage institutionalizes this division between the "normal" and the "not so normal." Marriage sanctifies some relationships at the expense of others, and offers protection for sexuality that occurs within marriage, while invalidating and stigmatizing sexuality that takes place outside of marriage. With marriage we run the risk of creating "good gays" and "bad queers" (Warner 114).

Neither does the marriage framework recognize the complex web of intimacies queer people often create. As Warner puts it:

queers have an astonishing range of intimacies ... most have no labels, most receive no public recognition ... many of these relations are difficult because the rules have to be invented as we go along ... they can be complex and bewildering, in a way that arouses fear among many gay people and tremendous resistance and resentment from many straight people. Who among us would give them up? (116)

Straight culture, on the other hand, tells us "that people should be either husbands or wives or (nonsexual) friends. Marriage marks that line." Perhaps, suggests Warner, straight culture has something to learn from the "welter of intimacies" queer people create "outside of the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations" (116).

The idea that straight culture has something to learn from queers holds currency in recent debates about queer parenting as well. University of California sociologists Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, published an article in 2001 in which they attempted to move away from the heterosexist "no difference, same as, just as normal as" arguments to look at what might actually be different or unique for children growing up with lesbian/gay parents. The differences they highlighted in children growing up

with lesbian/gay parents included less traditional gender-typing, higher self-esteem and better mental health, more egalitarian, shared parenting, more closeness and communication between parents and children, and increased awareness and empathy in children toward social diversity. These differences are interesting and, as Stacey and Biblarz say, “planned lesbigay parenthood offers a veritable ‘social laboratory’ of family diversity” (179). What is most significant, in my opinion, is the shift from the defensive position of proving that our families and our children meet some arbitrary and non-existent heterosexual norm, to the acknowledgement that there may be some possibilities created for children who grow up in queer households, households that may challenge profoundly historically entrenched gender dynamics, and where there may be an openness to sexual, and other kinds of, diversity. We should celebrate that our children are aware of and empathic towards social diversity—celebrate and expand this openness and create an environment in which they truly know that they can explore their own sexualities.

What I am suggesting is not simple. As queers we continue to be shamed and stigmatized due to our refusal to adhere to the sexual and familial norms of straight culture, and there is pressure on us always to conform, to have our children conform, and, particularly, to deny our sexuality in order to conform. The lesbian parent quoted below poignantly summarizes how we sometimes experience these tensions and inner conflicts:

We’re clearly not aiming to fit in and we have this joint role of influencing our children with the message, “Be who you are.” There is such pressure on us, as dykes, as weirdos, as outsiders, and you know that anything that goes wrong with these children, somebody’s going to blame it on your sexuality and how you’re bringing them up. So that puts pressure on you to bring them up as perfectly fitting-in children. And you have to stop all the time and say “no, no, no, no, no.” And we’re into pretty wild and raunchy sex and leather outfits and all this stuff and how do you go into the world and balance all this? For a while I decided “Okay, I’m going to give up that sex stuff, I’m going to become a nice safe academician, couldn’t I just get a Ph.D. and I’d be a famous smarty cakes, right.” And then I go “no, no, this is the devil talking, you’re about to make a really sick deal here, so put back on that leather jacket, get out to that dance, you know and let the kids see all of that.” ... I want them to do well academically, that’s their survival ... but they’ve got to be them in that, and wear whatever they want to wear, talk whatever way they want to talk, and be sure of who they are inside themselves. That’s probably one of the hardest struggles. (BW)

How will our children be sure of who they are inside themselves if they experience us denying who we are? By

this I mean *all* of who we are—and by “we” I mean people, queer people, who celebrate the range of existing and yet-to-come-into-being non-normative sexualities (gay and lesbian sexualities among them), people who are trying to, as Warner puts it, “bring about a time when the loathing for queer sex, or gender variance, will no longer distort people’s lives” (39).

If what we are seeking is an end to the loathing of queer sex and gender variance, a strategy that disavows queer sexuality in favour of an institution that bestows rights and privileges on those who enters its doors, and denies rights

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and privileges to those outside the doors—those on the fringes, those who choose other ways to live their lives, those who define their sexual and intimate relationships outside of marriage, those who do not choose or prefer to live in a couple—seems a poor choice of strategy.

And yet I am deeply moved and fairly sure to cry at every queer wedding I attend. Why are we so touched by these ceremonies that are about an institution we do not necessarily endorse? Perhaps because we so crave and desire recognition for our intimate and sexual relationships and for our families. We have been so othered, so hated, so rendered invisible—we are hungry to be seen and recognized, made knowable and our lives possible. And there are material consequences to our lack of state recognition. As Judith Butler puts it:

It means that when you arrive at the hospital to see your lover, you may not. It means that when your lover falls into a coma, you may not assume certain executorial rights. It means that when your lover dies, you may not be permitted to receive the body. It means that when your child is left with you, the nonbiological parent, you may not be able to counter the claims of biological relatives in court and may lose custody, and even access. It means you may not be able to provide health care benefits for one another. These are all very significant forms of disenfranchisement, which are made all the worse by the personal effacements that occur in daily life and invariably take a toll on a relationship. The sense of delegitimation can make it harder to sustain a bond, a bond that is not real anyway, a bond that does not “exist,” that never had a chance to exist, that was never meant to exist. If you’re not real, it can be hard to sustain yourselves over time. Here is where the absence of

state legitimation can emerge within the psyche as a pervasive, if not fatal, sense of self-doubt. (114)

It is certainly not this sense of self-doubt, this sense of not being “real,” that we want to pass on to our children.

Butler goes on to raise questions similar to Warner’s. Do we allow the state to monopolize the resources of recognition? Are there other ways of feeling possible, recognizable, even real? The way the marriage debate is being framed means that our “striv[ing] to become recognizable requires that we subscribe to a practice that

relations (partnering) and relations of dependency (parenting). This could have significant implications for the structuring of social policy: “Perhaps gays would do better to support legislation that removes marriage as a legal and economic category, while at the same time creating frameworks to socially, legally and economically support relations of real dependency: parent to child, caretaker to caretakee, able-bodied to the disabled they care for, etc. (Walters 356: FN 9).

With the likely victory of same-sex marriage in Canada it seems even more important that we maintain the

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delegitimizes those sexual lives structured outside the bonds of marriage and the presumptions of monogamy.... What would it mean,” asks Butler,

to exclude from the field of potential legitimation those who are outside of marriage, those who live nonmonogamously, those who live alone, those who are in whatever arrangements they are in that are not the marriage form?... Such a practice is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with a radically democratic, sexually progressive movement. (115)

The question then becomes how do we both acknowledge our desire for intelligibility and recognition *and* maintain a critical and transformative relation to the norms that govern what is intelligible (Butler 117)? In other words, how do we struggle for recognition of our relationships and families while struggling at the same time to transform what is recognizable? Warner poses the same challenge when he suggests that rather than aiming to win acceptance by the dominant culture, we aim to change the self-understanding of that culture—to broaden the range of sexualities and family forms that are recognizable and legitimate.

Suzanna Danuta Walters, in a thoughtful essay on same-sex marriage, concurs with Butler and Warner that marriage “reinforces structural inequalities within families ... privileging state-regulated, long-term pairing over other forms of intimacy and connectedness.” She raises questions about the conflation of *partnering* (a presumably sexual relationship between consenting adults) and *parenting* (a relationship of profound structural dependency). Citing the work of feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman, she suggests that in order to create a less gendered social order a distinction should be made between peer

distinction between partnering and parenting. The right conflates marriage and procreation—we don’t have to. In fact we have a special talent for not confusing love and procreation, as it doesn’t usually work that way for us—we rarely wake up pregnant. One of our greatest contributions has been the ways we create non-normative families. As Kath Weston has documented, many queer people have formed “families of choice,” sometimes due to hostility and/or rejection from our families of origin. In our desires to have children we have made use of reproductive technology, we have asked each other for sperm donations, and we have found people with whom we are not romantically or sexually involved but with whom we choose to parent. While many of us parent in couples, we also create families that have three parents, four parents, that are webs of complex biological and social relations, that challenge and expand notions of what it means to be a “parent,” and what blood, biology, and family ties are all about. I don’t think we want to allow this expansion of the meaning of family to be contracted by a yearning to be “normal.”

So, how do we resist “normal”? We can support legal struggles that recognize non-normative families, such as the one currently being fought in London, Ontario that aims to achieve recognition for three parents—a lesbian couple and the man they co-parent with. We can support other cases that work to extend parenting rights, separate from the rights of the couple. So, for example, in the Charter Challenge that has been filed to eliminate the need for lesbian co-parents in Ontario to do a second parent adoption, we can ensure that the right to second parent adoption is not tied to legal marriage. We can continue to work with Children’s Aid adoption workers to help them better understand our families—the meanings our communities ascribe to “chosen family,” that

sometimes we come together in more than twos to parent, that there are lots of ways to think through the question of male or female “role models,” that there are transsexual and transgender people who want to adopt children and would make good parents.

And we can resist the politics of shame when it comes to our children. As queer parents we already know how important it is to not pass on shame to our children. Their best protection from the homophobia and hatred they may experience at school and elsewhere is a lack of shame, a deep sense that they are just fine, that their families and their parents are just fine, and that if anybody disapproves, it’s their problem. As queer people we carry shame with us in complex ways. As parents we are forced to notice the places we get caught, the places our shame sneaks up on us and makes us not want to tell people about our families, about how we brought children into our lives, about our relationships and our sexuality. Of course, most of the times it’s none of their business, and we also want to teach our children to be strategic about where and with whom one chooses to “come out.” But as parents we can’t control when our children will come out for us, when we’re picking berries, on an airplane, in the supermarket ... we have to always be prepared to acknowledge our relationships and our families ... otherwise our children learn that there is something not okay about us, and therefore not okay about them.

So let’s extend what we already know about the destructiveness of shame, to combat the politics of sexual shame. Let’s make sure our kids do not carry sexual shame, but rather, that they learn from us that sexuality and gender are varied, fluid, complex, messy, exciting, scary, fun, and always changing. And sometimes this means holding our breath. I hold my breath when my daughter comes out as we’re picking berries, or when I tell my 100-year-old aunt that there is no father, just a sperm donor, or when I tell the Holocaust survivor we are interviewing in preparation for my daughter’s bat mitzvah that she has two moms and see the look of miscomprehension? disapproval? cross her face. In the same way, I hold my breath when the conversation at the seder table turns to the joys of polyamory and my 13-year-old daughter and her friend get fascinated. I hold my breath at Pride Day when my daughter and her friend stand, open-mouthed, taking in the nudity and the kinky sex and the myriad ways people are celebrating themselves. I hold my breath when my close friend who was present at my daughter’s birth, and whom my daughter has always known as a woman, starts to grow facial hair and identify as trans.

I hold my breath and then I let it out because I realize our children can handle more than we think and because these are the people I love, the communities I love, and the communities and people and spaces that have allowed, and continue to allow, me to explore my own sexuality and to question traditional ways of doing family and relationships. I want my children to have the room to develop

their sexualities, their families, their communities. I don’t want them to live with a prescribed notion of what it means to be a sexual, alive, loving person. We don’t need to present our children with a unified, singular, and static world. I recall my daughter and her friend asking me detailed questions about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases while we’re cross-country skiing; or my daughter asking me to come to her school to talk about the “B” and the “T” from LGBT because “they know about lesbian and gay but they need to know about bi and trans,” or her asking me very matter-of-factly about what pronoun she should use to refer to a trans friend, or her telling me about the lingerie she plans to buy when she’s older. I recall these instances and realize that our children can handle complexity and diversity when it comes to sexuality and gender.

My intention is not to suggest that it’s all easy. It’s not. Parenting isn’t easy, and parenting with the added bonus of queerness is not always easy either. There are lots of difficult questions we have to answer, conversations to be had, and lots we don’t know. But let’s not fall into the trap of clinging to “normal” for the sake of our children. We owe them more than that.

Postscript: I asked my daughter to read and okay the above paragraphs about the incidents that cause me to hold my breath. Her response: “Do you mean we think those things are weird? Well, I don’t.”

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¹Eighty-nine per cent of Canadians live in jurisdictions where same-sex couples can legally marry. New Brunswick, Alberta, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have still not legalized same-sex marriage.

²At a technical briefing on the *AHRA* in December, 2004 we were reassured by Health Canada representatives that they have no intention of interfering with home inseminations. The Act does, however, prohibit payment for sperm and egg donations and for surrogacy arrange-

ments. It remains to be seen what the impact of this will be on availability of sperm and egg donations, and on surrogacy arrangements.

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R. LEIGH KRAFFT

submission

sifting through my
completed poems,
dreaming all night long
of things I should
change about them before mailing.
it's like that smear of jam
on my daughters round cheek
that I notice
just as we rush out to catch the quarter hour
bus.

I stumble over
my last love poem for you
and my covetous clutching of it,
never sending.

something in me leaps
suddenly
as I imagine it read and
huddled in hearts
circulating through some mountain town
the air moist and green-scented
the days placid and bare-footed
the nights
a cascade of glittering stars –

the poem
far away from me
as you are.

R. Leigh Krafft is a writer and artist, part-time teacher,
and full time mother struggling under the burden of
a relentless muse.