

DISSERTATION

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STAY-AT-HOME DADS

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STAY-AT-HOME DADS

#### A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Research on stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) has not kept pace with the increase in the trend and is lacking the in-depth description of their lived experience. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to describe and thereby better understand the lived experience of SAHDs and how they make meaning within the role.

Narrative inquiry works to restory the stories of the participants by gathering data, analyzing it, searching for themes, and rewriting it in a sequence that makes sense. In this study, in order to fully examine the lived experience of SAHDs, I encompassed a constructivist paradigm, which allowed for the evolution of the meaning and process. I realize that my participation altered the reality of the experience and that the stories that I present only captured brief moments of time; however, I drew heavily upon my therapeutic and clinical backgrounds to create a warm and compassionate environment which guided the way for an inductive exploration into each dad's lived experience. I primarily used unstructured interviews that focused more on Rogerian therapeutic principles than direct Socratic questioning; however, I maintained boundaries which provided focus, shape, and scope. These unstructured interviews provided the space for the participants to talk freely and openly as I obtained very rich quotations from each dad which I have presented within the narratives. By including these excerpts, often in their entirety, I maintain the integrity of the process, meaning making, and authenticity of each individual story.

This narrative inquiry contains the lived experience of four SAHDs, ending with my own account. Each dad's narrative is presented individually, uniquely, and told in its entirety followed by my holistic content analysis which explores the themes of both the inner and outer world of each dad as embodied by his past, present, and possibility of the future. By doing so, this study gave voice to the SAHD experience and opened doors for future research and understanding. The individual and cumulative effects of the narratives have provided avenues for understanding for readers to make their personal meaning of the lived experience of SAHDs. I have also provided recommendations for clinicians who are working with SAHDs or their families. I conclude with my journey through this qualitative inquiry and a brief letter to SAHDs.

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I am grateful to my wife for her unwavering support and belief in me. I have loved you since the day we met. You are my best friend and I am so thankful we are sharing this life together.

I am grateful for my kids. You are my little rock stars. Remember, you can accomplish anything in your lives. Dream big and never doubt that your parents are right behind you...all the way to the moon and back!

I want to thank my parents who taught me to put family first. I love you!

I raise a glass to the dads who participated in this study. You are truly amazing men. I am honored to stand among you as a stay-at-home dad.

And, finally, Grandpa, I did it!

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife and kids. I love you with all my heart.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
PART ONE.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	2
Prelude.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Problem Statement.....	7
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Research Questions.....	9
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	10
Who is the Stay-at-Home Dad?.....	10
The Stay-at-Home Dad Experience.....	11
The Evolution of Gender Role Theory.....	14
The Stay-at-Home Dad in Therapy.....	16
The Stay-at-Home Dad in Social Work.....	17
Recommendations for Future Research.....	21
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	22
Conceptual Framework of Inquiry.....	22
Research Strategies and Methodologies.....	24
Participant Selection.....	25
Data Collection.....	25

Interviews.....	26
Interview Location.....	27
Observation.....	27
Data Analysis.....	28
Ensuring Quality.....	29
Trustworthiness.....	29
Authenticity.....	31
PART TWO	
Introduction.....	34
CHAPTER FOUR: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STEVEN.....	36
PART ONE: HIS STORY.....	36
Prelude.....	36
Steven.....	37
Childhood.....	37
The Love Story.....	43
Stay-at-Home Dad.....	48
Daycare.....	54
New Frontier.....	56
Parental Roles.....	62
Typical Day.....	68
Societal Response.....	71
Bullying Effects.....	74
Final Thoughts.....	77
Postlude.....	78
PART TWO: ANALYSIS.....	80



Steven is an Explorer/Wanderer .....	80
Steven was Bullied.....	84
Steven is Ambivalent.....	90
Societal Norms Influenced his Ambivalence.....	90
Ambivalence of Stay-at-Home Dad Role Existed Before Children .....	93
Ambivalence is Amplified by Guilt.....	94
Conclusion .....	95
CHAPTER FIVE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SCOTT .....	96
PART ONE: HIS STORY .....	96
Prelude .....	96
Scott .....	97
Youth.....	98
Dad.....	101
Dad Revisited.....	106
Love and Marriage.....	108
The Decision .....	112
Stay-at-Home Dad .....	112
Men .....	115
The Introduction of the Second Child and the Introduction to the Suburbs .....	116
A Boiling Point .....	121
Donald Draper.....	121
Parenting Styles .....	122
The Lived Experience .....	127
Future Reflections.....	130
The Vision Revisited.....	131

PART TWO: ANALYSIS .....	132
CHAPTER SIX: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SEAN .....	139
PART ONE: HIS STORY .....	139
Prelude .....	139
Sean .....	139
Childhood .....	140
Post High School Timeline .....	143
Wedding .....	144
Career before Children and the Stay-at-Home Dad Agreement .....	145
Childhood Revisited and the Preparation for Parenting .....	146
Parenting Preparation with Lisa .....	149
The Babies .....	151
The Lived Experience .....	154
Masculinity and Femininity .....	157
Emotional Articulation .....	162
Impact of Stay-at-Home Dad on his Wife .....	164
Impact of Role on His Children .....	165
Highs .....	168
Lows .....	169
Recommendations .....	171
PART TWO: ANALYSIS .....	174
Childhood Masculinity .....	174
Adult Masculinity .....	178
CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MATT DRAKE: MY STORY .....	184
Prelude .....	184

A Brief History of My Lived Experience as a Stay-at-Home Dad .....	184
My Beginning .....	189
My Childhood .....	190
A Big Memory .....	190
Superman .....	191
My Dad .....	192
My Wife .....	192
The Decision .....	193
Heather’s First Day Back to Work.....	194
Average Day .....	196
Another Day.....	198
Isolation.....	199
Masculinity .....	200
My Identity.....	201
Societal Responses.....	201
The Transformer Helmut .....	202
Best of Times and Worst of Times .....	203
Aging.....	203
Ambivalence .....	204
Rock Star.....	204
A Moment of Glory .....	205
Advice .....	206
Hey Dad, Write a Dissertation.....	207
CHAPTER EIGHT: ANYLYTIC PERSPECTIVE.....	209
Genesis.....	210

The Purpose .....	211
The Stay-at-Home Dad Within and Without the Literature.....	211
Outliers.....	213
Gender Role Theory and the Stay-at-Home Dad.....	215
The Stay-at-Home Dad in Therapy.....	217
What Did I Learn .....	221
Suggestions for Potential Stay-at-Home Dads and Those Currently Within the Role .....	222
Recommendations for Future Research.....	223
PART THREE	
CHAPTER NINE: MY QUALITATIVE EXPERIENCE.....	226
Prelude .....	226
Why I Chose Qualitative Research and the Constructs Used .....	226
What I Learned .....	231
CHAPTER TEN: TO THE STAY-AT-HOME DAD—OFF THE RECORD.....	233
CHAPTER ELEVEN: POSTLUDE .....	235
REFERENCES .....	236
APPENDIX A.....	243

## **PART ONE**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### **Prelude**

September 5, 2011

It is lunchtime. My kids just finished their appetizers of peas and frozen broccoli [a culinary treat and favorite of my daughter]. They are sitting patiently awaiting the arrival of pasta and red sauce. The kitchen floor is covered in a sea of green. A few minutes later pasta begins to make its descent as my 13-month-old son continues in his favorite pastime of launching food from high chair to floor. The tile now resembles a Jackson Pollock masterpiece. I'm in a contemplative mood and enjoy the art. My daughter asks for a water refill. This marks at least the tenth time I have stood up from my seat to retrieve something that I needed to get or refill. I do not mind. Despite the mess, they are eating and there is a sense of satisfaction. I refill her water and a little spills on her pajamas which she loves to wear at all times in the house. She keeps her clothes meticulously clean and stands up and leaves the kitchen. I know where she is going and I am looking forward to her third outfit of the day. I hear her climbing the stairs to her room. I can sense her frustration with her server at the Drake Hotel. She then proclaims, "My hair got wet too!" She is laughing her beautiful laugh. Oh, how I love that laugh. I am now standing by the refrigerator. I look at my son who is completely covered in red sauce. I gaze at the floor and think it should be in the Guggenheim in Venice. I then begin to laugh which quickly turns to tears. My son gazes at me and gives me a reassuring nod like I am on the right path. Sometimes I sense my kids just know. It is if I am the student. I look back at my beautiful

boy and recognize that I am unsure why I am crying but I sense a catharsis of some kind. It is in this moment that my gratitude overflows and I think what a wonderful world. And, it truly is.

## **Introduction**

My life has been a journey, a vivid portrait of intersecting puzzle pieces fitting together in unique ways to form the narrative of my life. As I reflect upon it, it becomes clear that the jigsaw puzzle was for a reason leading me to this space in time; my dissertation.

My life changed drastically nine years ago with the birth of my daughter. My wife and I had been married almost eight years, and after nine months of planning it was really happening, we were parents. We prepared to be parents as well as any other couple. We attended child preparation and CPR classes at the local hospital. We met and became friends with couples who were also becoming parents. We read books and talked late in the evenings about what great parents we were going to be, however, we were different; I was going to be a stay-at-home dad (SAHD). Now, nine years later and after the birth of two sons, I continue to be a SAHD caring for our three children.

I never expected my identity would include the role of SAHD. I identified with masculine and feminine narratives of my culture as I grew up. I was athletic and was the captain of my high school's basketball team which resulted in a scholarship to a small junior college. Being in the locker room and talking about "guy" stuff was a comfortable environment for me, but I also embraced feminine narratives. I knew society had cultural norms and prescribed behaviors for standards of masculinity; however, they were never a concern. I valued my own ability to determine what becoming a man meant. The men in my family were my role models and were very masculine yet displayed comfort in expressing emotion, even tears. I believe my acceptance

of the feminine side of my personality led to my decision to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). Within the therapeutic relationship I am able to express empathy and compassion in ways that may be unfamiliar to most men. This high level of ease with emotional content and expression of empathy were influential components in the decision to take on my new role after my daughter was born.

Making the decision to be a SAHD was difficult for me and my wife. I was building a private practice and just beginning to have some success while my wife's income was substantially more than mine, stable, with health benefits. Most of all she enjoyed and identified with her work. We believed it was extremely important to have at least one parent in the home to avoid daycare if we could. We had waited close to eight years to have a child and wanted to raise her ourselves and did not want someone else doing it in a daycare setting.

After three months of maternity leave we were ready to make the transition. We had initially planned to keep my clinical practice as healthy as possible. My wife would rush home from work, and I would literally hand off our daughter as I rushed out the door to see clients. Soon the reality of parenthood and the transition into our new roles began to consume our identities and my practice slowly faded away. Our once thriving relationship stagnated as we were so exhausted that the only thing we could do was sit in front of the television hoping to tune out our frustrations. Our communication suffered and we became more isolated and alone in our roles. It seemed we gave all we possessed to our daughter and made little time for each other. I felt like I was losing my best friend. I cannot express the incongruence of complete sadness in my role as a husband and the elation as a father. I felt lost and soon began to perceive that my role as a SAHD was literally a no man's land. I truly believed people would be more accepting and the stigma I perceived from the general population was disheartening but it was what was



happening behind closed doors that hurt the worst. Not too long after, I began to question my manhood and what I was doing in the role. I wondered if life would be better if I would have done things differently, such as taken a different career path. I asked myself, what would have happened if I made more money? I struggled to discover personal meaning, my place in contemporary masculinity, and obtain some congruence with modern society. I remember talking on the phone with a good friend who expressed envy in my role and stated he would do it if things were different for his family. This only added to my ambivalence within the role. At times I felt I had to prove my manliness. I can vividly remember doing hundreds of crunches and push-ups while my daughter was doing tummy time. I grew out a beard and began growing out my hair. I was doing anything and everything to make myself look like Tarzan, the king of masculinity, just to avoid the ridicule. My daughter and I would get strange stares as we walked the mall, or went to the grocery store, or even the local park. I felt as if I was always alone and the isolation was becoming overwhelming. Even when I had work, I was alone. No one was paying to hear my problems.

I had tremendous empathy for my wife who was attempting to juggle everything but had trouble expressing it to her. I watched her struggle in the morning as she walked out the door to work wrestling with her mothering instincts. I thought back to when she was pregnant and the deep connection she felt with our daughter as she carried her for nine months. She was the happiest mother-to-be and now I heard her vocalize sadness and frustration with not being with our daughter as much as she would like. But I also heard her express satisfaction in her work and the joy it brought her. I had difficulty sorting out the ambivalence we both had for our roles.

We soon realized we needed outside assistance. We contacted a local clinical social worker and participated in couple's therapy. She was helpful in many ways but was guided only

by what she was experiencing in the sessions. I had already perused the local bookstores and various websites for good information on the SAHD experience but had very little luck. I knew she was in the same predicament and could not be guided by any academic literature.

Despite my frustration, I understood the importance of my responsibility to father and transmit values of personal strength, self-confidence, independence, and curiosity to my daughter. I reminded myself every morning of the extreme privilege of spending so much time with her. I have spent more hours with her than some men spend with their children in a lifetime.

However, as I watched my wife struggle to give our daughter a kiss and walk out the door and I continued to wrestle with my own manhood. I struggled with the ambivalence and isolation leading to feelings of doubt. Through it all, my gratefulness to my wife for trusting me with such an important responsibility has never wavered.

Three years after the birth of my daughter the journey through fatherhood continued with the birth of our son. His presence brought balance into our lives. My wife and I began thriving in our relationship. Our communication improved, yet I continued to grapple with my role. I questioned my desire to be a SAHD and I was flooded with positive and negative memories. Furthermore, having a boy prompted me to think about my relationship with my own father and the definition of masculinity. It affected how I taught it and passed it on to my son and daughter.

Three years later we had another son. We now have accepted our roles as parents and have found happiness and joy in raising our children. In a different space and time, we may wish the roles were reversed but we revel in the fact that our children are happy and so are we; however, I continually questioned how I am creating meaning through this experience as a SAHD. Answers to this type of question are what I sought to discover in this inquiry. I wanted

the voices of other men who are blazing this new frontier to be heard. I valued their stories and did everything in my power to present them in their fullest, richest, and truest form.

## **Problem Statement**

The roles of men and women are changing in today's communities, especially how they relate to division of family labor within the home. Many fathers are choosing to stay at home and raise children, while more women are staying in the work force. The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) reported an 18% increase in fathers who stay at home from 1994 to 2001, and a 65% increase from 2004 to 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). In 2005, an estimated 2.9 million children in traditional married couple homes were cared for by fathers (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2005). The 2006 Census estimated 159,00 men have remained out of the labor force for at least one year to be the primary caregiver to a child while their wives/partners work (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In 2013 the number increased to 214,000 (U.S. Census, Bureau, 2014). Unfortunately, the current state of knowledge regarding SAHDs has not kept pace with the trend.

For most men the transition to parenthood is a critical time for gender roles to influence the dynamics of a relationship (Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008). Men typically begin to work more and women begin to cut back assuming traditional roles. These prescribed gender roles tend to dictate how men and women behave and respond to others (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005) especially in times of transition. But what happens as men and women begin to anticipate and live a role that is contradictory to the norm?

Research discovered SAHD couples report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than their traditional counterparts (Merla, 2008; Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley, & Scaringi, 2008). This increase in relationship and life satisfaction may come from

support of their partners (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008), shared empathic responses for the assumed roles, and strong communication skills (Zimmerman, 2000).

However, this satisfaction does not come without pitfalls. SAHDs may face an array of judgments and negative consequences (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005) within a society which often responds negatively to men and women who do not adhere to traditional gender roles (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). SAHDs report feeling an under appreciation and lack of approval within society, disapproval for the lack of traditional work, and the reception of fascination and confusion within the role (Zimmerman, 2000). These feelings may lead to isolation and loneliness. In fact, SAHDs report the highest levels of loneliness among all parental roles. These data conflict with a qualitative study performed by Rochlen, Suizzo, et al. (2008) where 70% of participants recognized the stigma within the role, but did not report any personal negative effects.

As evidenced, studies have focused on relationship and life satisfaction of SAHDs using various gender role theories as theoretical frameworks. These studies provided the research community with demographic information and discovered SAHDs tend to be happier with their relationships and generally more satisfied with their lives compared to other populations of men; however, little research has been done exploring the direct experience of these men. Focusing on this lived experience may be an effective approach in understanding and making meaning of SAHDs and may provide significant answers to those contemplating the role or currently within it.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to describe and thereby better understand the lived experience of SAHDs and how they make meaning within the role.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study as it sought to understand and make meaning of the holistic (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) lived experience of the SAHD.

1. What is the lived experience of the SAHD?
2. How does he make meaning of his life within the role?

This dissertation was consistent with the emergent characteristics of qualitative research; therefore, these questions were never meant to be exhaustive and were open for further exploration as the study developed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

#### **Who is the Stay-at-Home Dad?**

The US Census (2008) narrowly defines a SAHD as a father who is married with children under the age of 15 years old and has been out of the labor force for at least one year as his wife works. However, this definition is not consistent with research and may be inhibiting the knowledge base regarding the SAHD.

The SAHD, as described in the current body of literature, is Caucasian, college educated, with a mean age range from 37 to 39 (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). He has made a choice to be a SAHD because he and his partner value a parent being home with the children (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). He is flexible in defining his masculinity but typically describes himself as following traditional masculinity norms (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). He reports lower levels of gender role strain than his peers and is less affected by gender role socialization. He has high life and relationship satisfaction, as well as good psychological well-being (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). He feels supported by his partner, family, and close friends (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008) yet often feels isolated (Zimmerman, 2000). He is dismayed by society's lack of appreciation (Merla, 2008; Zimmerman, 2000) and low social regard for his role (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). He struggles for social legitimacy and wrestles with feeling like a failure (Doucet & Merla, 2007). However, he feels confident and reports high levels of parental efficacy (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). He understands the importance of encouragement, self-development, independence, and exploration in parenting

(Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). He emphasizes traditional masculinity in his parenting by promoting risk-taking, independence, and sports (Doucet & Merla, 2007). He distinguishes what he does from what mothers do. He is not trying to replace her (Doucet & Merla, 2007) within the family dynamic. He is the SAHD.

### **The Stay-at-Home Dad Experience**

Household division of family labor is changing in today's communities as many men are taking on the role of SAHD. The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) reported an 18% increase in fathers who stay at home from 1994 to 2001, and the 2006 Census estimated 159,00 men have remained out of the labor force for at least one year to be the primary caregiver to a child while their wives/partners work (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In 2013, the number of men within the role increased to 214,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Despite this societal change and recommendations for further research (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), the current state of knowledge regarding SAHDs has not kept pace with the trend.

Most men transitioning into parenthood begin to take on the traditional characteristics of their masculinity by working more (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005); however, when a man anticipates the transition into a role that is contradictory to the norm and his prescribed masculinity, with very little literature to light the way, it becomes challenging.

Having a child within a traditional family with traditional roles is difficult enough. The introduction of a child creates major changes in a marriage, often for the worse. In the first year, 70% of wives experience a plummet in their relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Further research (Elek, Hudson, & Bouffard, 2003; Perren, Von Wyl, Bürgin, Simoni, & Von Klitzing, 2005; Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006) announces these findings with marital satisfaction for both mothers and fathers decreasing for up to one year after the birth of the child

and more than 25% of mothers and fathers demonstrating higher intensity levels of depression one month postpartum (Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett, & O'Brien, 1999). In addition, the birth of a child has been demonstrated to surface any underlying, existing problems within the marriage (Cowan & Cowan, 1998). Gottman (1999) suggests a woman's dissatisfaction with her relationship after the birth of the child doesn't have to do with the temperament of the child or its sleeping habits, but has everything to do with whether her husband/partner makes the transition into parenthood with her. It is clear that men are not making this transition as profoundly as their counterparts would desire, yet within SAHD couples the father has no choice but to share in the depth of life change and their newly discovered gender roles. In fact, SAHD couples report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than their counterparts (Merla, 2008; Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). This increase in relationship and life satisfaction may come from the cooperative spirit within the relationship coupled with strong communication skills (Zimmerman, 2000). Also, support of the SAHDs' wives/partners has demonstrated to be the most salient variable for predicting relationship satisfaction and the strongest predictor of life satisfaction (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008).

Satisfaction does not come without pitfalls. SAHDs may face an array of judgments and negative consequences (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005) within a society which often responds negatively to men and women who do not adhere to traditional gender roles (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). SAHDs report experiencing fascination and confusion within their role by others while feeling under appreciation and a lack of approval within society (Zimmerman, 2000). These impressions may lead to isolation and loneliness. In fact, SAHDs report high levels of loneliness within their role (Merla, 2008); however, data often conflict. In a pioneering study, Robertson and Verschelden (1993) found SAHDs were happy within their chosen role and that



their life satisfaction was significantly higher than the general population. These men reported feeling psychologically healthy with no ill psychological effects as a result of their role and expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to have time with their children. Furthermore, in a qualitative study by Rochlen, Suizzo, et al. (2008) 70% of participants recognized the societal stigma within the role, but did not report personal negative effects.

Even though, at times, there is a contradiction within the literature, it is clear that SAHDs are in a new frontier and wrestling with their own masculinity which may be why researchers tend to focus on the gender role strain and gender role conflict of the SAHD. Gender role strain may result in a man's incongruity between expectations and actual characteristics leading to low self-esteem and negative consequences (Pleck, 1995). None of the 14 fathers in the study performed by Rochlen, Suizzo et al. (2008) envisioned themselves in a traditionally feminine role as SAHDs at earlier points in their lives. In fact, they all had hobbies and interests that annunciated the traditional masculine norms with which they were raised, such as sports and cars. They report the ability to accept traditional masculinity that is useful and reject that which is not. SAHDs recognize there is a divide between culturally accepted masculinity and femininity. Pollack (1995) suggests once men are separated from their mothers, and begin to form a masculine identity, that maintenance of this identity is often achieved through the defensive hardening of the self and boundaries which could manifest at the conscious and unconscious levels of the adult male. This defense may lead to problems within relationships and contribute to gender role stress which arises from this excessive commitment and reliance upon the culturally approved masculine norms (Eisler, 1995). Men may begin to have difficulty recognizing and expressing emotion. If this stress continues a formation of gender role conflict may occur as socialized norms begin to conflict within the individual and others (O'Neil, Good,

& Holmes, 1995). SAHDs report a lack of legitimacy within the role (Merla, 2008) and having to resist the stereotype and pressure to be “a man” and “have a real job” (Zimmerman, 2000); however, they resolve this demand by embracing the traditional masculinity that fits and rejecting what does not, defining masculinity in very personal and flexible terms (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008).

### **The Evolution of Gender Role Theory**

Today’s masculinity is changing and a look into the history of the gender role may be enlightening. As stated, research focusing on the SAHD has concentrated primarily upon gender role theory which has evolved over the past three decades. Pleck (1995) became the leading scholar within masculinity researcher by introducing the idea of gender role strain which included gender role discrepancy, trauma, and dysfunction. The construct gender role discrepancy was developed and defined as the incongruence between one’s gender role expectations prescribed by society and the actual characteristics one possesses. Discrepancy occurs when a man tries to live up to the roles of his society or culture and cannot. The resulting incongruity between one’s expectations and actual characteristics may lead to low self-esteem and other negative psychological consequences. For example, the lack of expressed emotion may be considered masculine but could possibly deter lasting and meaningful relationships. Burn and Ward (2005) supports this notion reporting men who conform to traditional norms and women who perceive this conformation are less satisfied with their intimate relationships. Dysfunction is present when a man fulfills the traditional role only to find it unsatisfactory and not rewarding; therefore, successful fulfillment of male role expectations can have negative consequences because many of the characteristics viewed as desirable or acceptable in men have inherent negative side effects, either for males or for others. For example, a father’s authoritarian and

domineering parenting style may be acceptable within society but may prohibit him from developing trusting relationships with his family. Often dysfunction would surface as men found traditional traits not rewarding. Gender role trauma exists when a man has ideals imposed on him and the results are emotionally disturbing causing the ensuing trauma. Pollock (1995) reported for boys to define themselves as masculine, they must be different from their mothers. They must clearly separate from the mother, both intra-psychically and interpersonally. Achieving and maintaining this separation may require a defensive hardening of the boundaries of the self and ego. These boundaries are found within the conscious and unconscious levels of little boys, and later adult males. This dynamic presents an incongruity within the psyche of the SAHD who has presumably separated from his mother, yet finds himself within her role.

Gender related stress followed into the academic dialogue. It postulated that boys would develop masculine schema through the social constructions of society. Typically the adoption of such schema would be rewarded. For example, boys learned to attack rather than cry when someone hurts or threatens. Gender role stress could arise from excessive commitment to and reliance upon prescribed societal roles and the perceived failure to meet these culturally sanctioned behaviors. For example, men who perceive their income to be insufficient to meet their family's needs are significantly more depressed and have lower relationship satisfaction than their self-perceived adequate breadwinners who uphold a traditional norm (Crowley, 1998).

Ultimately, O'Neil and colleagues' (1995) gender role conflict was constructed and defined as a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences on the person or others. This conflict occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of self or other (O'Neil, et al., 1995). It is theorized that men experience gender role conflict in one of six ways:

(1) deviate from or violate gender role norms; (2) try to meet or fail to meet gender role norms of masculinity; (3) experience discrepancies between their real self-concept and their ideal self-concept, based on gender role stereotypes; (4) personally devalue, restrict, or violate themselves; (5) experience personal devaluations, restrictions, or violations from others; (6) personally devalue, restrict, or violate others because of gender role stereotypes (O'Neil 1995, p. 167).

There is an emerging construct labeled gender role journey (O'Neil, et al., 1995) that may be of interest to the SAHD. The expedition begins with acceptance of traditional roles, evolves to an emerging ambivalence of the gender role which may lead to possible confusion, anger and fear, and ultimately an interest in personal or professional activism. It recognizes the importance of social support along the journey which has proven to significantly reduce negative consequences of gender role conflict (Wester, Christianson, Vogel, & Wei, 2007). This journey is recognized as an ongoing process and seems to reflect modern man's surfacing attitudes toward the reshaping of masculinity.

### **The Stay-at-Home Dad in Therapy**

Recommendations for the treatment of the SAHD within the therapy are limited to one study. Rochlen and McKelley (2009) offer nine suggestions to clinicians working with the SAHD: (1) check expectations and biases, (2) understand that the SAHD is typically in transition and will re-enter the workforce, (3) discuss the need for social support within a potentially isolating role, (4) normalize fear and obstacles, (5) do not ignore the money talk and how it influences the family, (6) provide decision making help, (7) consider a strengths based approach, (8) practice Gender Aware Therapy, and (9) consider alternative treatment approaches such as

support groups. My study recognizes further development of therapeutic interventions for the SAHD as a purpose and will seek to add to the existing literature.

### **The Stay-at-Home Dad and Social Work**

In 1990, Greif and Bailey (1990) performed a comprehensive literature review of five major social work journals over the course of 27 years. Their goal was to identify the frequency of research pertaining to fathers. They only discovered 21 articles which focused on fathers, which is less than one article per year across the five journals. Furthermore, these articles typically focused on the negative aspects of fatherhood, such as perpetration.

In a more current analysis, Shapiro (2010) chose six journals, five within social work, which received high citation ratings relating to social work issues. The data search spanned from 2004 to 2008. She discovered 24% ( $N=62$ ) of the 262 family-focused articles included father variables, compared to 53% that examined mother variables (Shapiro, 2010). There was an overlap within the articles, with most father variables (Shapiro, 2010) also containing mother variables. Only 2.6% of the articles reported father variables without the inclusion of mother variables. Of the five social work journals only 17% contained father variables. Furthermore, of the father variables articles, only 54% used father self-report or father self-observation; while the other 46% used mother, child, or case worker report on father variables. And finally, only 12.5% of the studies actually included fathers as participants within the research.

The lack of research on fathers should be of major concern for social workers and places them into an under-researched population. Like other historically neglected research populations, fathers often do not have a voice within research because researchers tend to use accounts from mothers, children, and caseworkers to describe fathering. This could potentially lead to and perpetuate gender bias, continued inequity for fathers, and interference with the social worker's

ability to understand and address needs of fathers. Furthermore, the majority of data analysis on fathers has been performed using secondary analysis which limits the scope, creativity, and direction of the research.

There has been difficulty in defining the effects of fatherhood. Popular culture has purported a mythology that fatherhood in America has progressed linearly over time from the domineering patriarch to the egalitarian caregiver (E. H. Pleck & Pleck, 1997). However, the American father was extremely involved with his children during the Colonial era when work and family life was rarely separated. The industrial revolution forced a separation between a father's work and family domains. This separation led to theories of maternal attachment that defined the father as a figure on the periphery of child rearing whose importance was questioned and unnecessary. These ideas flooded the literature but today men are challenging these roles and some researchers have focused on masculinity and worked to refute these paradigms that stereotyped them into rigid gender roles within the family (Silverstein, 2002).

The mythology of fatherhood and the allegiance to maternal attachment theory had researchers questioning whether infants formed attachments to their fathers (Schaeffer & Emerson, 1964) and if fathers were as responsive to infants as mothers (Frodi, Lamb, Leavitt, & Donovan, 1978). Early myths of the biological maternal attachments theories that were dominant in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century America claimed fathers do not matter and mothers are more sensitive. These myths were later refuted by findings that neither men nor women are natural caregivers and that parenting is learned on the job (Lamb, 1987). Researchers soon discovered that after the first year of the infant's life mothers tended to be more in tune to its needs and cues than fathers (Lamb, 1987). This could possibly be explained by fathers not having the opportunity to be as involved as mothers in a traditional caretaking society.

It is evident that paternal involvement is important and it has been identified in three separate areas: (1) accessibility, (2) engagement, and (3) responsibility (Silverstein, 2002). Accessibility is when a father is present but not interacting. Engagement is direct interaction between father and child. And finally, responsibility is involvement including executive functioning like remembering a child's appointments.

Understanding the consequences of high levels of paternal involvement has led to a battery of studies. High paternal involvement with children has been associated with cognitive competence, higher self-esteem, improved social skills, and less gender stereotyping (Silverstein, 2002). Among daughters paternal involvement has been associated with higher competence in schooling, especially mathematics (Silverstein, 2002). With sons, high paternal involvement has been associated with lower drug usage rates, less criminal activity, and lower likelihood of becoming a teen parent (Silverstein, 2002). Also, there have been associations with paternal involvement and sibling cohesion and positive maternal interactions (Silverstein, 2002). The data have been mixed regarding married couples and high paternal involvement with lower life satisfaction reported initially for mothers (Baruch & Barnett, 1986) yet greater long term satisfaction (Snarey as cited in Silverstein, 2002). High paternal involvement has been linked to greater empathy skills, greater parenting skills, and overall self-efficacy among men (Silverstein, 2002).

Most of the data cited took place many years ago which annunciates the need of more studies including fathers. Furthermore, all of the social work studies outlined focused on fathers, but not one included SAHDs. Past researchers have voiced their frustration by stating developmental psychology is a data set that is sex-biased against men (Phares, 1992) and that there are thousands of studies outlining the mother-child attachment and very little on father-

child attachment (Lewis, 1997). I share similar frustration with the lack of research involving SAHDs. I have searched the Social Work Abstract database using the keyword SAHD and found one article published in 2000, stay-at-home dad yielded no results, and house husband generated one study published in 1976. When I included the PsycINFO database and used the keyword SAHD, it produced 16 articles. This lack of research within social work supports the direction of my research. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in its Code of Ethics states the “primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people ” (Preamble, NASW Code of Ethics, 2008) which includes fathers caring for children. It is evident social work needs more research related to fathers and could possibly be perpetuating negative stereotypes. This could be discrediting the paternal impact on children. As stated previously, using Social Work Abstracts as a search engine yielded not one study performed by a social worker on SAHDs. Furthermore, a survey of six textbooks used within BSW and MSW social work programs did not address SAHDs and very little focused upon familial interventions, especially in relation to fathers. This is surprising given the importance of systems and person-in-environment theories proliferating social work. Only the direct practice textbooks discussed familial interventions, which were very limited.

I believe it is time for social work to address the gap within the literature as it relates to fathers. My inquiry seeks to explore the burgeoning role of SAHD. This role changes the familial dynamic, is progressive, and unique. SAHDs are helping to reshape American masculinity, but they are often doing it alone lacking guidance in literature and assistance from professionals. This inquiry seeks to address this deficit. Performing research to assist these men, their partners, and children is congruent with the values of social work which emphasize equality, compassion, and the importance of family and children. As Silverstein (2002) recommends, it is time to



reshape the construct of father as a nurturer rather than solely a provider. She calls specifically for qualitative research within the field of social work to address fatherhood issues.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Past researchers (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008) make some recommendations for future SAHD research: (1) a focus on the reasons why men who embrace traditional masculinity are SAHDs; (2) how SAHDs integrate their role with other aspects of their male identity; (3) address the various ecological factors in the decision making process to become a SAHD and the adaptation into the role. I sought potential answers to these questions by exploring the qualitative lived experience of the SAHD.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Conceptual Framework of Inquiry**

Due to the lack of literature focusing on the lived experience of SAHDs this interpretive inquiry is qualitative in its design, strategy, and methods and is guided by the concomitant paradigm and frameworks established within it. A paradigm, or interpretive framework, is a set of beliefs that represent a worldview (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) which, in turn, guide action (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba, 1990). This inquiry used the constructivist interpretive framework. As a researcher, a paradigm contains ontology, epistemology, and methodology preferences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The ontology, or understanding of reality, of this study is relativist, meaning realities are multiple, mental constructions that are socially and experientially based, local and specific, and dependent on individuals' or groups' formed constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemology, the relationship of researcher and participant, of this paradigm and inquiry is subjectivist and transactional, a co-creation between researcher and participant through the process of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The methodology, how one knows the world and gains knowledge from it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), of this inquiry is dialectical, hermeneutical, and natural in its setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In contrast to a realist perspective and ontology, within constructivism truth is the result of a perspective, which is constructed by the mind of the individual (Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, construction and reconstruction of self is an ongoing process, which adapts to the needs of an encounter through the guidance of memories and hopes and fears of the future (Bruner, 1990).

Constructivism holds the belief that human beings develop concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of their experience and recognizes historical and societal dimensions impact the creation of knowledge. For constructivists there is an emphasis on the pluralistic and plastic character of reality and the recognition of the possibility of multiple meanings through symbols, language, and the intentional movement and shaping of reality by the individual (Schwandt, 1994). Within constructivism, discourse is the practice that constitutes representation and description. Therefore, a constructivist researcher is interested in sharing and understanding the lived experiences of others; thereby, co-constructing and “giving voice” to the creation of shared meaning and understanding.

Constructivism advances to social construction, which shares the belief that reality is a construct that is created by a knower or a group of knowers (Phipps & Vorster, 2009). Social constructionism is a development of constructivism’s interpretive and subjective stance and postulates reality as an artifact of communal knowledge (Phipps & Vorster, 2009). Therefore, it is a construct shared by a community of knowers, such as gender role. Social constructionism, therefore, is considered a development beyond constructivism because reality goes beyond the individual’s subjective mind and is turned into a creation of social interchange (Phipps & Vorster, 2009).

Constructivism and social construction are important conceptual frameworks within this interpretive inquiry as I sought to discover the subjective meaning a SAHD assigns to his life and the impact of familial and communal prescriptions of traditional gender roles. It is congruent with the frameworks that govern social work, which have guided my work as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker throughout my career. As a social worker I espouse the person-in-environment and ecological systems framework which emphasize the individual’s interaction with the

environment and the various system levels found within it (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997). Borrowing ideas from biology, the ecological systems theory posits that individuals are in constant interaction with systems in the environment and that these transactions have a reciprocal effect on each other (Hepworth, et al., 1997). This inquiry looked into the lived experience of the SAHD using these conceptual frameworks by addressing micro, mezzo, and macro systems which include bio-psycho-social makeup, marital, parent-child, family, friends, neighbors, and cultural subsystems, as well as organizations, communities, and physical environments that are shaping the construction of his life.

### **Research Strategies and Methodologies**

A research strategy encompasses a set of skills, assumptions and practices that researchers use in transitioning from a paradigm to the empirical world; in essence, moving the paradigm to action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Given my experience as a LCSW and SAHD, I believe I am in a unique position to employ two research methodologies, ethnography, primarily ethnographic interviewing, and narrative inquiry, which developed the richest insight into the lived experience of the SAHD. As a LCSW I have participated in one of the most unique relationships available to humankind. Within this intimate relationship I have witnessed the depths of human emotion and experience including the horror of severe trauma, the sadness and despair of mental illness, the power of forgiveness and the resiliency of the human spirit. I have developed an understanding of how to listen and encourage growth and change. I deeply understand the meaning and power of empathy and used these skills within this inquiry. As a SAHD I have composed my own ethnography of the SAHD experience and having a commonality with the men I studied provided avenues into trust and understanding that may not be present with other researchers. Ethnography is the attempt to describe a culture and

understand it from the participant's point of view (Spradley, 1979). Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience (Clandinin, 2000) within the culture and recognizes this experience as its fundamental ontology (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This experiential ontology is transactional (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), participatory, and congruent with ethnography. It encourages an exploration into the micro, mezzo, and macro (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and extrapersonal) levels of human interaction by addressing personal, familial, cultural, social, and institutional narratives. This approach led to stories describing the culture of the SAHD experience, the goal of ethnography (Spradley, 1979), which included the narratives of the participants' thinking, perception of the world, and assumptions of the human experience (Spradley, 1979).

### **Participant Selection**

This interpretive inquiry used purposeful and convenience sampling techniques. One purposeful technique is criterion sampling which was employed by seeking men who share the lived experience of the role of SAHD. This inquiry sought three to five men and settled on four including myself, who have voluntarily chosen to take on the role of SAHD. The SAHD must have been the primary caregiver while his partner was employed. Participants were recruited at local libraries and preschools. Two dads were referred by local children's librarians and the other through a preschool that my daughter attended in the Denver Metropolitan area.

### **Data Collection**

This interpretive inquiry used three forms of data collection, identified as field texts: interviews, observations and documents (Creswell, 2007). These forms of data collection are consistent with the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of constructivism by allowing the participant the ability to express his reality freely and openly in an environment that is transactional, dialectical, and natural.

## **Interviews**

The SAHDs were interviewed at least three times until saturation throughout the duration of this inquiry. Interviews were open-ended, using a diverge/converge model (Lincoln, 1985), and lasted at least 90 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. I used ethnographic and narrative interviewing techniques building upon my experience as a LCSW. Ethnographic interviewing, like clinical social work, begins with rapport building (Spradley, 1979) or building a relationship of trust. Trust is built in a therapeutic setting by engaging in empathy, warmth, and expressing unconditional positive regard and may be developed in the same way as a researcher. The ethnographic interview process may be described through the stages of apprehension, exploration, cooperation, and participation (Spradley, 1979). The alleviation of fear was the first goal of the interview process and was accomplished during our first meetings by describing the roles and expectations of the inquiry with the participant, reviewing the consent form and answering any participant concerns. I did not interview the SAHD participants during this initial meeting; it was simply a forum to build trust. The first stage, exploration, often encompasses feeling out, or testing, of the relationship. Reflective listening and a desire for congruency between the researcher and the participant are of utmost importance within this stage and were accomplished through the continued setting of clear boundaries, roles, and expectations. As the participants gained greater comfort and appreciation for me as the researcher cooperation ensued. Here, mutual trust was evident and stories evolved in depth by advancing to the final stage of full participation. My ethnographic interview consisted of descriptive questions and experiential exploration (Spradley, 1979). Therefore, ethnographic interviewing is often explained as a friendly conversation where the researcher gradually introduces new elements and questions into the dialogue (Spradley, 1979). Narrative

interviewing is congruent with the ideas of ethnography as it aims to understand the story through detailed accounts of experience (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Riessman, 1993). Just as a social worker may give away control to gain more in return; I often gave up control and let the participants drive the dialogue in order to obtain the desired thick and rich data and description (Riessman, 1993).

### **Interview Location**

The locations for the interviews were mutually agreed upon and were in an environment that was public, comfortable, and away from the SAHDs' home. Each interview either took place in a restaurant or coffee shop, and one at my house. The settings were casual.

### **Observation**

Observation was utilized within this inquiry to holistically describe the experience of the SAHD. I began this inquiry assuming the role of researcher, or outside participant, with the intention to build rapport and trust; leading to the role of insider (Spradley, 1979). Here, I gained access to the day to day experience of the SAHD. Throughout my interviews with the SAHDs I observed behavior. This observation is contained in field notes and included information regarding the SAHD and his family, interactions, routines, rituals, social organization, and interpretations (Denzin, 1989). Non-verbal behaviors were noted as I focused on the interpersonal space of the SAHD, his patterns of speech, body movements, postures, and tone of his voice as he responded to various stimuli throughout the interviews. I recorded my descriptive and reflexive observations in a field note notebook after each interview and used them to create continuity, depth, and richness in the narratives that developed.

## **Data Analysis**

The goal of data analysis within my narrative inquiry was to restory (Clandinin, 2000) the story of the lived experience of the SAHD. This restorying consisted of gathering data, analyzing it for key themes, and rewriting it in some sequence that makes sense (Clandinin, 2000). After returning home from each interview, I transferred my observations such as clothing, postures, and body language into field notes with the intention to restory a more holistic and accurate narrative. I then transcribed the interview. This was followed by reading and rereading the transcribed text with the original audio in the background. As I familiarized myself again with the data I began to look for emergent concepts that represented the participant holistically (Lieblich et al., 1998) within a the three dimensional space representing the past, present, and future (Clandinin, 2000). I then began coding the data. This codification started small as I addressed topics of importance which advanced to the discovery, exploration, and illumination of bigger themes. As I reread the transcripts, I continued with the analytic process and looked for weaknesses within the interviews, constantly asking myself if there were places, things, or ideas I may have missed and, if so, made notes to readdress through member checks during the next interview. From there, I contacted the SAHD and we would meet again for our next interview. I started the ensuing interviews by reviewing what we had covered previously and ask for any clarification if needed, thus ensuring that the emergent story was authentic. I then answered any questions the dad may have presented with at that time and moved to the next interview. The process would then repeat. With each interview, as more data were shared, emergent codes continued to become grander developing holistic narratives and the retelling of the story began to take shape. If gaps within the story became apparent, they were addressed in a future interview. This process continued until each dad's story reached saturation.



Exploration into a three dimensional space provided a framework for the full examination into the lived experience of the SAHD as encompassed by the constructivist paradigm and person-in-environment framework of social work. Within this three dimensional space I looked for the SAHDs nature and presentation of his reality through the exploration of his inner and outer world as embodied by his past, present, and possibility of the future (Clandinin, 2000). This space was contained by the boundary of the present moment that I captured marking a brief truth within each dad's evolution. It was through this holistic (Lieblich et al., 1998), three dimensional lens that I made value judgments on which of the many possible constructions to include in the study. This inquiry incorporated hermeneutic and dialectical characteristics, a hermeneutic cycle, which ensured trustworthiness by comparing and contrasting my constructions with those of the SAHD. The story was then finalized in a narrative that gave voice to the lived experience of SAHDs.

### **Ensuring Quality**

#### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is one dimension needed to ensure the quality of an investigation and its findings that make it noteworthy to an audience (Schwandt, 2001). It may be obtained using four criteria which I used in this inquiry: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, (4) confirmability (Lincoln, 1985).

To ensure credibility ethnographic interviewing, the major tool used within the inquiry to gather data, was employed to gain trust, establish rapport, and obtain access to prolonged engagement (Lincoln, 1985) into the life of the SAHD. This prolonged engagement was obtained by interviewing each dad within the study at least three times for around 90 minutes per

interview. During this prolonged engagement I used persistent observation (Lincoln, 1985) and explored the characteristics and elements that are most prevalent in the lived experience of each SAHD. During this process I also used triangulation (Lincoln, 1985), or the use of many sources, methods, and theories to corroborate my ideas and discoveries. I believe focusing on these three activities provided direction, depth, and credibility to the inquiry (Lincoln, 1985).

The next technique I used to ensure credibility was the use of peer debriefing through conversations with my Advisor. Similar to the use of supervision within clinical social work, peer debriefing was helpful for many different reasons. Within research, debriefing, for me, provided an opportunity for reflection and guidance through my exploration of biases, meanings, interpretations, and potential hypotheses of the study (Lincoln, 1985). It also ensured the methodological design was appropriate and developing on course (Lincoln, 1985).

I also used member checks by discussing the products of the research with the SAHD throughout the course of this inquiry. Essentially, I attempted to process the process every step of the way. During the interview process, if I did not understand what was being discussed, I would ask the participant to clarify. After the interviews, the data were discussed and summarized to the SAHD.

The second criterion of trustworthiness is transferability. To determine if the findings are externally valid within this inquiry is at the reader's discretion; however, it was my intention to provide readers with enough rich and thick description which emerged from the narratives of the SAHD to make transferable conclusions into their own lives and experiences with SAHDs.

Dependability is the third criterion for trustworthiness which was used within this inquiry. To ensure the data collected were reliable the instrument must produce consistency. Within qualitative research the researcher is the instrument and must be reflexive in the process.

I ensured dependability by employing similar self-reflection techniques as I do as a LCSW and implemented reflexive journaling, self-exploration, and member checks with my advisor, which ensured the data were grounded within the constructivism of the participant and did not contain a preconceived agenda or any of my own countertransference.

The last criterion for trustworthiness is confirmability. To ensure that my findings were a product of good process I created an audit trail which included the audio interviews, transcripts, field notes, reflexive journals, and peer debriefing.

### **Authenticity**

Complimenting trustworthiness is authenticity (Lincoln, 1985). To further convince the reader what I discovered in this inquiry is accurate and helpful I used four criteria or guidelines (ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical) to demonstrate authenticity which is predicated upon the relativist ontology, subjectivist epistemology, and hermeneutical methodology constructivist paradigm guiding this inquiry.

Constructing this inquiry using relativist ontology, I recognized the multiple meanings of the constructed experience of the SAHD and the complexity found within it. Therefore, to ensure this inquiry is ontologically authentic I utilized dialogical conversations built upon the concepts of ethnographic and therapeutic interviewing. I was open to the development of alternative research purposes and actively explored emergent possibilities. Essentially, I let the story tell itself. I sought an emic perspective as I began to truly understand the experiences of the SAHD through his eyes. I developed a relationship of trust through the concepts of person-centered therapy which are warmth, empathy, and compassion. I did not judge and did not engage in Socratic questioning. I simply let the SAHD be, as he was. I believe the use of the above techniques provided an atmosphere for deep introspection which added to the interpretive

potency of the inquiry (Manning, 1997). Therefore, as data were collected and many possible interpretations were available, I made a conscious choice to take an emic perspective, and was guided by an ontological authenticity which adhered to the conveyance of the complexity of the SAHD experience and a heightened awareness of this role.

Educative and catalytic authenticities are similar. To ensure these authenticities were met I employed the use of personal reflexivity which gave me the freedom to explore my assumptions, biases, and data. I also used member checks, ethnographic interviews, and peer debriefing. By following these techniques I demonstrated increased awareness of the lives of SAHDs and provided not only the academic community with useful narratives but fulfilled the purpose of this inquiry through the dissemination of useful and actionable information to the SAHDs that are currently in the role, men contemplating taking on the role, and the clinicians who may work with SAHDs and their families.

The last criterion of authenticity is tactical. It is developed by negotiating the use of data, assuring confidentiality, consent forms, dialectical conversations, and member checking. If tactical authenticity is achieved the participants are empowered to act. Within this inquiry the SAHD narratives could give individuals within a society a unique lens to look at the role differently, becoming a transformative experience at all system levels which would fulfill not only my goals as a researcher, but also as a social worker advocating growth by challenging restrictive norms.

## **PART TWO**

## PART TWO

### Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe and thereby better understand the lived experience of SAHDs and how they make meaning within the role. The following four chapters contain the lived experience of four SAHDs, ending with my own account. Each dad's narrative is presented individually, uniquely, and told in its entirety followed by my holistic content analysis which explores the themes of both the inner and outer world of each dad as embodied by his past, present, and possibility of the future.

This dissertation is a narrative inquiry underneath the umbrella of qualitative methodology. As stated, narrative inquiry works to restory the stories of the participants by gathering data, analyzing it, searching for themes, and rewriting it in a sequence that makes sense. In this study, in order to fully examine the lived experience of SAHDs, I encompassed a constructivist paradigm which allowed for the evolution of the meaning and process. I realize that my participation altered the reality of the experience and that the stories that I present only captured brief moments of time; however, I drew heavily upon my therapeutic and clinical backgrounds to create a warm and compassionate environment which guided the way for an inductive exploration into each dad's lived experience. I primarily used an ethnographic interviewing style (Spradley, 1979) that was unstructured which focused more on Rogerian (Rogers, 1961) therapeutic principles than direct Socratic questioning; however, I maintained boundaries which provided focus, shape, and scope. I believed these unstructured interviews would provide the space for the participants to talk freely and openly. My belief was correct, as I obtained very large quotations from each dad which I have presented within the narratives. By

including these excerpts, often in their entirety, I maintain the integrity of the process, meaning making, and truth of each individual story. During the editing process I read each interview countless times looking for holistic themes and a sequence that would make sense within the restory; therefore, each narrative is told differently as it evolved on its own without any preconceived structure. Each story is told in a similar format to provide continuity for the reader and assist with the narrative flow. The format contains headings representing themes, often followed by an italicized quotation from the dad represented in the narrative. All names and places have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STEVEN

#### PART ONE: HIS STORY

##### **Prelude**

*I think the underlying thing you have to say is when you've got something good sometimes you get distracted, because you feel that when something is good there are always things at the start. I've found in my life, if something is going to be good...you don't get something for free in life. With being stay-at-home dads, there's no doubt in my mind that it is one of the true blessings we will ever have in our lives, but of course in the buildup to that there's always the shock to the system. Like, 'oh my God', trying to readjust your life, trying to work out how you are as a man in the paternal role, in the stay-at-home role, how you feel about it, how you're seen by other people, how you fit in. If you go to those groups, like I go to music group, and I'm the only guy there and it's kind of like here we go again. I'm so used to it now, it's like here comes the stay-at-home dad ladies, in the minivan. I think when it is all said and done, I will say to myself it was a true gift. But at first you don't see it as a gift; you see it as a necessity. When my kids move out one day and I'm not in the role, I'll be like I was a stay-at-home dad and it was a fucking blast! It was a blessing. It really, really is; to be able to do that for my children.*

*See, people kind of look at winning the lottery, getting the job, doing well...particularly in America, joining the rat race, becoming successful, getting a good car, a good house...when you take all that away, when you're born and you live in this world, what is the most important thing in your life? You'd have to say that your most important thing in life is your offspring, your partner that you married, that is your soul mate and the children you produce. To me, I feel...and I've said to Mary... we've won the lottery. We have the blessing of a fantastic family. I have the honor of raising them and being around them as a stay-at-home dad. When you think about it, money is a medium of exchange; it is just an idea. Money is in no way, it will never be any better than being a man in charge and looking after your children. That to me is like you've got a winning lottery ticket. One day we will all die and look back and be like how did we get it so wrong? Money doesn't mean shit. None of that stuff means shit. What matters is love and family and friendship and children and being given the blessing to raise your children. People will realize one day that there is no greater thing, there's nothing better than that. Certainly there are things that come with it, it can be a challenge, but underneath it all, it is such a blessing. It really is. Only the best people can do it you know, or only the most blessed people.*



## **Steven**

Steven is in his late 30s and is a father of four children. His oldest is seven and during the course of our interviews, he welcomed his fourth child into the family. Steven was born in England, north of London, in a small village. He moved to the United States shortly after meeting his wife and has been here since. He is a SAHD, personal fitness trainer, and techy extraordinaire. He is currently building an internet based business as he trains clients in the evenings and weekends. He is extremely charismatic, creative, passionate, and introspective. His lust for life and family overflows in our interviews as he discusses what it is like to live the SAHD experience.

We meet many times over the course of a year. Most of our interviews take place in a local restaurant. He dresses casually, but stylish. He is a little shorter than six feet tall and is extremely muscular. His hair is short and his beard varies in length of stubble depending on his mood and time of day.

## **Childhood**

Steven was born in England, north of London. His only sibling, a brother, is ten months younger than he. They are very close. He describes the town of his youth as a “small village.” He was educated within his local public school system. He looks back on his early childhood and describes himself as a “happy kid” who loved his family, yet his childhood was filled with a dark cloud, a lack of acceptance from those within his community. His words are filled with fond remembrance and pure heartache. I ask him to describe his childhood.

I remember a sense of happiness at a young age in the naïve stage. I remember that happiness was like the key to everything; I remember being purely happy. I remember me and my brother being happy, playing, and being happy with our family. Everything about our family was... families have arguments, parents argue, whatever. But the bottom line was that we were always happy. I remember when it started getting to the stage where things in that world grew up and people and such presented the obvious...because

obviously there is a flip side to happiness. I was so happy. I'm so lucky, I'm living the dream and what a cool childhood and just having a great time where I grew up was a fantastic place in the countryside. We'd climb railway bridges, swimming in lakes doing this great stuff. Then when you saw the yang to that...there's a yin and a yang...you saw these people and this stuff I had to deal with and things I didn't like. It kind of created a cloud over the happiness. You felt like it destroyed the happiness, the things that I held dear, which was essentially happiness. I loved to have a laugh and be happy; life from a young age, that's what it was about. So my past I think was shaped honestly in a nutshell by that. By having this sense that what I found great about life...you can call it naïve, you can call it childhood but there is no doubt that happiness is the most important thing in life and I think that is what it's all about. Whether you're a kid or you're an adult or whatever you've got to be happy, that's what you strive for. That's what John Lennon says isn't it?

Being a John Lennon fan, I instantly agree with a smile. Steven settles into his chair reflecting upon the dichotomy of happiness and sadness of his childhood. He takes a breath. He is wrestling with something, seemingly unsure if he wants to delve further. He then sighs, "Who I am today." I wait patiently with anticipation. He continues to reflect on his clouded past and its ability to shape the present and future.

I never even talk about this but to be quite honest the biggest thing in my life is when I was a kid when we grew up in this village in England. To an outsider you look at it, a lot of people in America, and now me definitely as I'm older, you look at this place where I grew up; it was like paradise, beautiful countryside. It was like *Lord of the Rings* you know, like *The Hobbit*, it was a beautiful place to grow up. But the problem was my family, my mom and dad moved us out, away from the city. They moved to the countryside for work and then my brother and I were born. The bottom line was we never really fit in. I remember when you're young and you don't even know anyone in the village and the village was our whole world. Then I was like I'm going to be at the age where I'm starting to mix with these people and it became very apparent that all these kind of ideas I had being a kid were suddenly challenged by the fact that we were outsiders in the village. I felt, because I was the oldest and my brother was younger, I felt something that never left me, that sense of being an outsider and not fitting in. This kind of constant sense of violent threats and bullying from this very fact that I didn't fit in. It is something that all my life, it really did set a precedent that I had to get the hell out of there as soon as I could. It was the reason I got away. The ironic thing now is that I go back now and I love it. I love going back to see my family. But I would never, ever, ever, ever, ever live there again. From this very young age, this experience that I had of being like this kid and having a laugh, suddenly from the age of around 8, 9, 10, thinking are we going to fit in and I felt this sense of not belonging and not being accepted. As a kid it makes you very sad to the point where I would get, my brother would get picked on, I always ended up getting in fights. I wasn't and I'm not a violent person at all. I just

remember I would get in fights to protect my brother and just be so emotionally torn up by it. But it kept going on and on and on right through from that young age to 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and to the point where I finally ended up leaving going to college, off on my own, and travelling the world. That seed set in very young that I didn't like the sense of not being...it wasn't so much not being accepted or fitting in because you're an outsider. I've always had the sense that I wanted to be cool and meet cool people. Seems to me that I grew up in a village where there were so many inbred fucking people that were all related to each other, like cousins of cousins of cousins. This whole energy was all wrong for me. There were a handful of people who were good but it wasn't enough good people. That is the problem with living in a village; that small village mentality really affected my perception of what I wanted in life. And as I got older, I remember travelling, trying to find these people. My life really started when I began to travel. Particularly the best part of my life was when I met Mary and moved to America. It's not because of America; it is because I've come to a place where I'm older and meeting good quality people. It's to the point where maybe it shouldn't have but it's given me a sense that I'm very, very, very aware...of course I'm judgmental, but I expect people to be really cool. And if there is the slightest thing where they're not cool, it just brings back memories to me as a kid. I will always be like that; I can suss people out really quickly, really quickly. I meet someone, I talk to them, and I can tell straightway. Sometimes I don't even speak to the person. I can just suss it straight away by the way they act, by the way they look, by the way they respond to you. It's kind of like a defense mechanism now of me being around people I don't want to be with. I won't say now because there are so many great people in my life, with good quality friends. I'm very loyal. I'm very honest and decent with people.

Steven continues focusing on the present.

But now of course, this carries over with me being a parent because I'm friendly; I'll chat with anyone but I'm...you wouldn't know this about me...I'm so protective. I know that parents are protective but I'm so fucking protective of my kids. Especially when they get to primary and middle school,...because I got bullied because of all this shit for 11 years of my life...if they ever, ever get bullied at school, I told Mary there's going to need to count to ten because one thing I cannot stand in life is what I've gone through in my life. It reshaped my life...bullying...it is something that makes my blood run cold and I get so angry inside about it. Because it did, it shaped my life; it shaped a lot of things and how I do them. Now as a parent, the lifestyle that I've got now is such that I've got the people around me that I want to be around. I've got good people around me and I'm bringing my children up in a place where...I'm not naïve to think there's not good and bad people around me and people that aren't cool...I just feel like I'm in a place where I want to be. I would never, ever, ever be raising my children back in a place like where I grew up because of what I went through. This whole thing in a nutshell has shaped how I am underneath, it's not only on the surface...you wouldn't know that if you just met me, I'm just a friendly person...I'll never be able to shake what I went through as a kid and the things that emotionally scarred me. They made me the person I am today. That made me very quietly judgmental. I'll suss people out very early. I'm kind of the yin and the yang, I'm overly friendly, and I want to be friendly. But if I sense someone is kind of like, has

any bullshit, I'm like fuck it; I'm not doing that. As I said, it's made me. I think it is going to manifest more as the kids get older now but I'm very, very, very protective of my kids. I don't want them to go through what I had to go through. That's the one thing in my life that I tell people...Mary knows...it is the one thing in my life that very much set me up for who I am today.

Steven shifts in his seat and continues with the story. I am grateful that he trusts me with this intimate part of his life that has so deeply shaped him. I can hear the anger in his voice when he discusses the effects of the bullying. My heart sinks. I reflect on the bullying which happens to so many children on a daily basis. He continues to shed light upon his upbringing.

I went back to England a few years ago and we have these big lakes behind where I grew up...It is a beautiful, beautiful place... and you're going back into things...and don't get me wrong it isn't like this was an everyday thing...it was just a theme that I knew these assholes were looking to cause trouble with Kenny [brother] and me because we were outsiders. It was always me because I was big for my age. I was the tallest in the area and I just grew very quickly. That basically warrants attention and then my brother would get picked on. I remember one day I was like I've got to keep quiet and then I saw my brother get picked on and I was like, 'fuck it, Steven'...So I got up and I remember going after these kids and no one ever stood up to them. I was like, don't be saying that to my brother and then from that point it was like hell on earth, but that's my brother. I counted the days until I could get the fuck out of school. I was done, I was out, and I was like fuck it.

I realize how the role of protector is a recurrent theme in Steven's life. He is a lion to those around him. I hear the deep, embedded years of frustration and ask Steven if he attended school every day in the midst of all the turmoil.

Oh yeah, there was the odd day that I didn't but every day I went. I remember going every day and thinking how can I avoid these people? How can I keep out of their way? I think the only thing that kept it tolerable was that I got into sport. And this is the problem, this is the Catch-22, these are all things that...all this shit is stuff that I will be thinking about watching my kids for signs...was that ironically I used to get loads and loads of attention from girls as a young kid because you're different and an outsider or whatever. But also, I was into sport. I was like I grew up. I hit puberty before anyone else. I was in puberty quickly and in all the sports teams. I wasn't what you'd call a jock but I was good at what I did and because of that, I got less of the shit than I would have done. Because I was in the teams with these assholes you know, but that kind of saved me a lot more shit than I would have had. But even so, I felt myself as a kid, why am I here? Why am I growing up here? Because I didn't fit, I could tell that I didn't fit in, not in the slightest. I just thought to myself, this is not something that makes me at all happy.

I am curious if Steven's parents were aware of the unhappiness he felt and the daily turmoil present in his lived experience, or if it was even discussed.

Kind of because I'd go back and they'd see me. One time I got in a fight in the streets and I went back home. The trouble was I'd end up beating these kids up and that made it worse because then the next one would come along. Towards the end it got to the point where this bully, he started it one time with my brother, so I just kicked his ass bad and they didn't expect that and even all of his mates were there and I beat him real bad. Because I think as a kid you've got so much pent up frustration, you're going through puberty. I remember beating this dude senseless, I put him over the wall and I just kicked the shit out of... I just beat him senseless; because it was emotional for me. I'm just like beating him and yelling at him to leave me and my brother alone. I beat him silly. And I remember all of his mates were laughing at him and that made it worse. I'm like don't laugh at him and I remember one of them was an older guy, like he was probably in his twenties, and this is how messed up this is; these kids are hanging out with these twenty year olds. He saw me beat him up and he came up and hit me in the back of the head to sort of help this little bastard out. I was thinking to myself, and my brother was standing there watching, and I told him not to get involved, I just went down and pretended like I was knocked out and they were all kicking me. I remember thinking you can't even have a fair fight here.

I went home to my mum and dad and my dad was like, 'I'll go round that house.' And I was like, 'Dad, don't go round that house. These aren't the sort of people that will stand in the door and discuss it with you, and I don't want you to get in trouble.' I was just like, 'This sucks, you know.'

Steven lived with the bullying for many years, counting the days before he would leave to explore the world, however, the effects of the bullying have shaped him and carried over into his parenting heightening his paternal instinct to care for and protect his children. He continues the conversation moving from his own parents to a current discussion he had with his young children.

Long story short, it was something that I'm sure a lot of kids go through, but I remember thinking how bad it was and how I thought one day in the future if my kids ever get a sniff of going through this, I'll make sure that they don't ever, ever go through that. And also, I say to my kids, 'don't you ever, ever, ever, ever'... we had a big discussion about this two weeks ago, just understand this, I said to Mia, and Marc, and Gary is too young to understand this, I said, 'When you go to school you understand the most frightened scared person you will ever know at your school will be the bully. When you go to school, if there is a bully, he will be the most scared, frightened person at that school,

more than any of you.' I said, 'Don't ever think a bully, when you see them, is someone who is on top of the world.' I said, 'Inside at home, inside at home, with their family, wherever, they are so frightened inside. Inside their spirit and their soul'...It was something that we talked about and I said, 'This would come up again, we will talk when you're older.' And Mia is like, 'Daddy, what do you mean?' and now she's been telling, 'Daddy says that the bully is the most scared person at the school.' Mary's like, 'What did you talk about?' and I said, 'We just got talking about some stuff and I mentioned this to them and I said bottom line, don't you ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever make another person feel bad. I said if you see someone getting hurt, you stand up for the person who can't stand up for themselves.' I was like God man; this is totally me bringing up things from the past. I wouldn't say that it is irresponsible; it's something that I am very passionate about that I want my kids to know, especially right from wrong. I also want them to know don't ever think the day is coming when there are bullies around, that there is someone that is going to have a hold over you.

I've seen this complete contradiction, this thing where there was a cloud of negativity in people whose happiness came from making people like me feel miserable. So the bullying and that kind of thing, I said to myself I don't want that life and that's why I moved away. I know that happiness and everything you have is inside of you. But for me, I couldn't really be who I wanted to be unless I got to the age where I could move away and leave that shit behind. But I always knew that my source or my cause was happiness.

Sitting at the table, I cannot help but notice that Steven is strong. He is muscular. He is masculine, and yet, he is bruised and scarred from his childhood. I realize that hidden underneath his charm and jovial attitude is the anger and frustration of his inner child. Steven is a lion in a sheep's clothing and he continues to make peace with his bullied past and understands how it is creeping into his parenting as his children become older. If you met Steven, you would agree with his personal assessment; He is kind and cheerful, extremely pleasant and charming. He can light up a room and make each person feel special but he will be assessing the scene like a hawk stalking its prey. He will gravitate toward those who are good. He hopes his children will learn through his example and not have to experience the suffering he felt as a child. He understands being a SAHD gives him more opportunity to realize this desire.

## The Love Story

Over the course of our interviews I devote one entire evening to his love story with Mary. As we talk, I discover the deep love, devotion, and passion that the two of them share and the struggles they endured and conquered to make their love story a reality.

So the story of how I met Mary. It was 1999 and all my time up to that point I'd basically been travelling around the world because I didn't go to college. I didn't do any of that, I just travelled and moved around and did that. I was on my way to Switzerland to run a bar in a ski town. Then for some reason in October when I was just about to leave one of my friends that we met in Australia when I was travelling said 'Hey, we are going to go to Thailand for the full moon party,' which is the massive party every 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> of the month whenever the full moon is. It was on a small beach... this was 1999, he said, 'We are going to be there in December. Do you want to travel over, you and your brother, and meet us there?'

For some reason I remember them telling us and, back then we didn't use email believe it or not, I said to Kenny, let's do it. So I phoned the people and cancelled me going to Switzerland or Austria where I was supposed to go. We worked a few weeks in the bar and got some more money and then in December we left. We flew out to Singapore then we traveled from Singapore through Malaysia and up right away into Thailand. We got a boat over to this place to be there for the full moon party. They said to us there are two American girls, who are actually living in the hut, because there are huts, they all lived in huts in the mountains. It was really hard to get accommodations that time of year because all of the travelers were going there for these big hedonistic parties. So we got there to this island and it was crazy. It was hedonism. It was unbelievable.

We walked down the beach and we saw our friends and said hey how you doing? They said we do apologize but those two American girls who were going to leave and you could have their bed, they are staying. So we said, 'ah whatever' we are traveling. They said, 'You can stay in hammocks on our balcony' so we went up to their place up in the mountains there was a little hut with hammocks and we were like this is cool. I remember being on the hammock just lying there being a bit tired one afternoon and these two girls decided to walk up the pathway. One had blonde hair and one had black hair. For some reason all I saw was the back of Mary's head. For some reason I was like that is, that's the one for me. Not so much that's the one for me but I was intrigued I was like, who is that with the black hair? She turned around and we met and I remember for me it was just complete love at first sight. I was like bowled over. I was like 'whoa'... and my brother was there and he could tell he was looking at me and laughing. I was like, 'she is just awesome. She is bloody gorgeous.'

That night is the big party, the full moon party so we go decked up, we had ripped board shorts on but we painted our bodies in fluorescent glow paint. So we had like tribal markings on our faces and we went down and we were just clubbing out. It was on the

beach and we were out of our minds. We were there dancing until four in the morning. The waves were coming into the bar and we were standing there knee deep in ocean water. And the dance music was going and Mary, she was there and long story short...there's much more to it, but essentially I got the chance to talk to her. The second night we went down for the second party and she was there again and we talked even more. We danced and hung out together. We spent that night, we went back together that night and we spent nine hours talking, just talking. That's all we did, just talked, I'd never ever in my life had a connection with someone where everything I thought, she thought the same, everything I said she was saying the same. We just connected and I'd never ever had a connection before. I could tell because that was such a strong one, it was the one.

I realize that when you get something like that coming your way, you know it is meant to be. You can go looking for it but I always dreamed one day I'd get something that was going to be special, and I knew then. So, we travelled together through Thailand, Asia, Laos, Burma and places like this. This was round about December 22, they went through Christmas and New Year then she had to go back to working in Colorado. In January she had her birthday with me, we spent time in Bangkok for her birthday. She flew back and when she left I was just totally missing her. I was like a lost puppy. I just felt like part of me had gone.

I was planning to go to India from that point to travel with Kenny through some of the big treks there. But my whole mind had changed. I was kind of in limbo. I was in Twilight Zone. I was in a funk. My brother could tell. I said Kenny, 'I've got to chase her, I've got to go with her. I've got to find a way to be with her.' He knew. He totally could tell. And Mary, she could tell.

I ended up flying home to England round about February I think. By then we'd started to use email, I remember it was a crazy thing it was so...you're sitting there waiting for an email to come through it wasn't like you just went and did your own thing. You'd wait for the emails to come through each and we both knew we wanted to be together but it was such a hard thing because of immigration things like this, that, and the other. So I said, look, I planned to fly over in April around Easter time to meet her family and see her again. So I flew to Colorado, she met me in Denver airport. It was the best I was like ah babe you know. We drove and it was just magical, man. We drove from Colorado to Arizona this big massive road trip we talked more, got to know each other even more. I had no doubts it was meant to be. It was the one for me. Just being together was the best thing. It just felt right.

I met her family, her family are great. I met her brother; he was awesome. He was in Tucson at the time at University. We hit it off straight away. Then I had to come back and she came to see me in August. We did the email thing a bit longer; we were getting so pissed off because we wanted to be together. In August of 2000 she came to England to meet my family and they all loved her of course. My family in London...they all thought she was awesome. I said, 'babe we need to be together' so I got a job teaching water sports in Dubai, Middle East. I said, 'what I'll do babe is I'll get it then you can fly over



and get a nursing job.’ Because Dubai obviously was starting to boom at the time. So it was like we tried to find other ways to be together rather than just saying let’s just do it and screw the consequences.

So, I flew to Dubai. Dubai sucked for women. It sucked big time. So, within about two weeks I said to Mary, I emailed and said screw this I’m coming back. Let’s just do it. Let’s just get together. We’re just going to do this, me and you. Whatever happens, happens. I’ll come to America. I’ll get my backpack now and I’m going to come home, go to England and straight over to you. I told my mom and dad, and my dad he travelled all his life anyway. He was a lot older. He was an older guy always been travelling the world, he knew. I came back and said, ‘Mum, dad I’m going over there and try to start this.’ Of course my mom found it hard but because I was in the travelling mode, she just thought there he goes again.

It was round about October and I got there and I remember she was lining up jobs for me. I met some guy who took me to work for a couple of days. At the time she had a little garage, she was staying in her friend’s garage, it was like a converted room with like a bed but just to be together was the most amazing thing. I could only stay three months because of my visa. America wouldn’t let British citizens stay longer than three months unless you were married or whatever.

So I had three months I could stay there, so I stayed and we got odd jobs here and there. Then I had to leave back to England in December because of the visa. I remember getting back and just before I left I proposed to her, I went to the Grand Canyon and I’d asked her dad for her hand in marriage. I asked if he could help me buy the ring and I paid him back obviously a few months later when I started to work. He was excited he came with me and we brought the ring.

Went to the Grand Canyon and I was so bloody nervous. It’s weird looking back now because I tried to find the most unique spot and I found this crazy beautiful cliff and I went over there and she was like, ‘are you ok.’ I decided to tell her, it was weird. I was telling her all this crazy shit from my past, things I’d done that I’ve never told no one. That weird stuff that was personal that I’d never told anyone. She was like, ‘cool but I don’t care about any of that.’

Finally we got on this beautiful ledge and I just got down on my knee and said, ‘Would you do the honor, would you be my wife?’ She breaks down and I whip the ring out of my pocket. Because all that train ride there I had these cargo pants with the bloody ring in there and every time she got close to me I’m pulling away, don’t want her to touch the box. She’s all, ‘Are you okay? I’m like ‘Yeah, I’m ok.’ But I’ve never been so nervous in my life.

So she obviously said yeah. But then I had to go back to England. So it was December 2000, a year since we met. So much has happened that year. You can imagine leaving her was one of the saddest things because you don’t know how you’re going to get back. What they did then was you had to be out of the country three months before you’re

allowed to come back. So I was in England for 3 or 4 days and mom and dad could just tell I was moping around, I was down. I said, 'I've gotta go back.' They said 'how can you go back you can't because of the immigration.' I sat in my room that night and thought there's got to be a way.

So I wrote out this letter as if it was from my mum saying, 'Dear Mr. Immigration Officer, we've finally given our son our blessing for him to leave England and start his new life in America. Will you please help him get through safely and help him start his life? We're very sad to see him go but we put our faith in you.' It was that kind of letter. I gave it to mum and said can you read this and she said, 'What is this Steven?' I said 'Just sign it mum, it's just an emergency thing, we won't need this.' She said 'I hope we won't get in trouble.' I said, 'No, I won't even need it. I'm going back I'm getting a plane flight and going back. I can't not be with her.'

I went and bought a ticket the next day and I was like three days out of the country, not even a week and I'm heading back to Denver. My gut told me it was the right thing; I couldn't be away from her. So anyway, I got into America... was it Detroit? Detroit or Chicago. I got off the plane, I was so tired and I got in line at immigration and I don't know, man, I just had this feeling like something doesn't feel right. All of a sudden this woman in a military uniform, not even an immigration uniform comes up and pulls me out of line. Takes my bag and says, "Come with me, sir." I was like oh my God. I went to this little office, this little area like a holding cell. There were like five or six people and me. I was like what the hell? I sat there and I was like, I'm going to miss my connecting flight, I was freaking out. All the sudden she comes in, she calls me with another military guy and I go into his office. There's a guy, like a military general, I still don't know what he was.

He sat me down and he's looking over my personal belongings. We are looking at your itinerary. We see you've only just left America and you're trying to come back here not even a week or seven days since you left. The situation is that you can't. You've never got a K-1 visa. We have to put you back on a plane to London now and send you back. I wanted to cry. All I did was try to argue my case. I said 'look, I need to come back. Look I can't explain but could you just do me a favor and read this letter from my mum.' This guy looks at me and I whipped it out of my backpack and handed it to him. He sat down and opened it up. I decided there was nothing I was going to say I'm not going to talk my way out of it. I let him read it and I watched him and he's all stern and looking down at it. I thought this guy looks like he is softening a bit. I looked at him again and I thought I saw tears in his eyes, I swear. He looks up at me and kind of folds the paper really slowly and puts it back in the envelope really slowly. He stands up and reaches across and says, 'Son, I wish you all the best. I hope it works out for you and good luck.'

I just stood there dumbfounded, speechless. He says 'I'm going to let you go through and I hope it works out for you and wish you all the best.' I got my bag and I remember I ran soon as they stamped my passport, I ran to get the connecting flight. I felt like a million dollars. I was like ah, fuck yeah! I was so thrilled. In fact, it was actually New Years Eve, that's what it was. Because I'd got back in middle December and I was headed back it

was New Year's Eve. What I'd done was I planned to tell Mary's mum. I told her to get Mary into a certain bar. She was going out with some friends and I said pick me up and surprise her. So I was so euphoric. So I got on the plane and flew into Arizona. So I got into Phoenix and her dad picked me up and he was all excited. I said I made it through I can't believe it. I tried to tell him the story but we were trying to get to this party and she was in a restaurant with all her friends. I walked in and she was like 'Fuuuu'....That's the picture we've got on our fridge upstairs. It was just the best time ever.

From then, we said no matter what we're not going to be apart. From there, we started the immigration process and things like this. Don't get me wrong it wasn't like suddenly it was all easy from there. The fact was we were together and we did it all together. We had no money. We got ourselves a little condo, a little apartment in the middle of Phoenix, which was a dive. We got robbed and everything it was crap. So finally we said screw it, let's move back to Denver. We were happy there, it was the first place we were happy. We started our life in Denver. I came back and I started a concrete company at the time. We had a bit of savings and this guy he took me under his wing and taught me stuff. I started a business. I was the English guy going around to people's houses knocking on the door saying can I paint your garage floor and people were like, of course you can. A couple of thousand dollars a job and I was like babe this is cool. I got myself a little truck, she started working in the medical field and we started to build up. We started in a garage, like I said a little tiny garage. We got our first rental apartment, which we thought was the best thing ever in Denver. We were like, we got a place! The funny thing was about October 2001, just after 9/11 actually, my parents flew over and I didn't tell them what I was doing. I said just come and meet us and we'll pick you up in Denver. I think my parents were tripped out because they saw we were solid. We were together. I picked them up in my work truck. My brother was like 'I cannot believe you've done it, you've fallen on your feet in America, you've made it!'

So I picked them up in my work truck and they came to work with me some days and they came to our little apartment. My brother was like 'good for you Steven. You did it. I knew you could do it.' I was like, '?Yeah, I always knew I'd do it.' From there, we just carried on and then for the rest of 2001. So a few years later we moved into a house and we started on the babies. I mean there's a little more to it than that, but that is it.

Steven pauses in a contemplative manner. I am unsure if he wants to continue. I am comfortable in his silence and let him have the space to think. After a brief pause, he continues with his story.

That's basically the story, just having the faith in something, starting there and seeing it through. It never has been easy, but it has always been exciting. Been awesome you know. It's been the best thing ever to me. Like I said, I always knew it would, I always expected...I didn't know how but I always expected. I never did think I'd be lonely, or alone. I said to myself, fair enough I'm just going to travel the rest of my life and just travel around. But I always felt something was coming, I just didn't know when and when it did, it hit me so fucking, so hard. There was no denying it. You'd have done anything for that sort of feeling, for that sort of person. Anyone would have done because

you know that there's no words, I can't even describe it, the feelings. Obviously the feelings are the same now, they just get better. But the feeling then, I'd never experienced. I thought if something is this incredible, you do what you've got to do to be around them, to be around that person. That's why I just think everything is working out as awesome as it does. I'm truly blessed. I expected it, but also I'm grateful for it. I miss my family. I miss all that sort of thing. I do, but this is what I wanted and this is what I got. So that's it.

### **Stay-at-Home Dad**

Steven and Mary were raised with their moms in the home. They valued their roles and knew they wanted something similar; therefore, they did not want to place their children in daycare and made the conscious choice to have at least one parent in the home with their children as often as possible. Steven explains their decision.

Our situation is probably more predetermined purely because of the fact of being English and coming to America. At first it was hard for me to work because of the immigration reasons and stuff like that. Life from the start wasn't sort of a traditional relationship because my wife had to be the breadwinner. We had no choice to start our life together. So she did that and the pattern was set then. And then I went through a stage where I did work and I ended up having a construction company and I started a business and what have you. But then when it came down to we were having children, it just sort of happened that her job had better benefits. At the time, I was in a position where my job was working from home; my business was on the Internet. Therefore, it was almost predestined at that level. So, initially going into it, it was very much a case of this is the mold we've got...this is the way it's going to be. This is how we're going to work having children. We didn't ever think at this stage how do we change it to do the traditional thing or what would be deemed traditional, where my wife would be at home and I would be out working. It just so happened that our setup was like that. So, really it was predetermined; that is how it was. I just have to say that we won't ever change it because the way things are going; there would be a point where if she were to quit and probably explore that, where she would come home and I would be working from home doing what would be deemed the breadwinner. But as it stands now, which is quite common with people that I do know, my wife or women have a lot more influential jobs now with a lot more benefits and a lot better standing than I do, certainly than I had in England. Whereas when we were kids you never ever heard of a stay-at-home dad. So, that's how it is right now. I'd also say as well, it's funny because it's not something that's ever bothered me. I've not felt any stigma or any discomfort with it. From the very, very start I remember it is more to do with the lack of satisfaction of having come from another country trying to start a new life. There is a lot of pressure, a lot of stress trying to start a whole new life in a brand new country and that and have your wife be the breadwinner that as a man, initially was a shock. But I think we got out of that so quickly that when children were thrown into the mix it didn't even become an issue that was just how we

operated, that was our life. And it worked out perfectly well. That is not to say it wasn't without its ups and downs as all couples have. But as it goes, it was completely fine for us and the way things are going.

The story becomes clearer to why Steven took on the SAHD role as he describes the history of the working roles within their relationship and I ask Steven if there was much discussion and planning that went into their decision to have him stay at home with the children.

I think possibly, there are people who plan it down to the letter. But such was our life; I get back to it because this is what I know. Since I met my wife, we've had no one around us, no one supporting us. We've got families in a different country and a different state. We are completely on our own and we've become very self-sufficient because of that. A lot of times I suppose we do talk about things, we just have this understanding between us that we kind of know how things are going to work. When it came to our children, I don't vividly recall a sit down saying, 'Oh my God, we are having children how are we going to handle you being a stay-at-home dad', for example. We mentioned it, we talked about it, but as I say, we were very much in that role already, living that kind of lifestyle that our talks were more like health of the baby. I wanted to know how to change diapers, that sort of thing. There was some of that transitional period at the start... looking out for the child. I can honestly say, there was never that sense of oh my God, how are we going to handle this thing? Because we were a couple, we'd do everything together. We'd spent many years without children in this predicament anyway. And we got used to it. I feel we evolved pretty easily into it. I kind of expected it at some point. If you were to tell me before I was married that I'd be a stay-at-home dad I'd be like, 'Wow, we are going to have to sit down and have a big chat about how this is going to work.' But it was never like that. Never was. It was comfortable. It was two people who loved each other and were doing it together and that is what suited our life best. So, it didn't matter. We were both very, very happy with it. As I say, there were the times when we had kind of hiccups, but they were just, as far as I'm concerned, just learning curves in the relationship. You can't possibly go into any relationship with or without children and have challenges without having days where you're like, 'Wow, things aren't all rosy.' But as a couple you come together and you sort it all out, you roll with it. With the babies, with the children, I felt there wasn't time or place to turn it into a drama. It was like, we're parents, we have no one else around us to run this off of, no one around us to create a drama of this. It was like our life, we're parents and what suits us best and what works for us right now, it could change, probably will, who knows?, but what suits us right now for the last five years, at least, is me being a stay-at-home dad. I consider it quite honestly an honor; I'm blessed to have it. It doesn't mean I don't want to get to the point where my wife can come back and that's certainly going to be coming very, very soon. But there is a reason it's all happened, I don't know exactly why but we're believers that things happen for a reason and you make the most of them. Or you turn it into a drama and stress about them, but there's no need for that because we were doing well together. We'd handled it well before children, now that we had our children it just

became something that felt like a natural progression. Rather than something that felt like, how do we handle this?

The dialogue pauses. Steven is observant to his surroundings and he looks around the restaurant as if he is assessing its vibe. Steven continues.

So I love it, I really, really do. We've adapted to it, gotten used to the little changes that come with it, but it is a real blessing. We're very, very lucky. We recognize that as well. I think if we sat down and said honestly, then I would like to think of her doing the mother role. As I said, it's something that may happen. I'm amazed at how many people I find these days who have got the same dynamic as us. Women I talked to at my fitness training, a lady in the gym tonight and she was talking and saying that she was a professional mum, she has a full time job and her husband stays home and looks after the children. So you know, many, many times I hear this, whereas I say when I was a kid I never knew anyone. If dad was home who had the kids it was because he'd lost his job. That's how it was in England, definitely how it was. Why is your dad at home? Lost his job, going to go to jail, or something. So yeah, it is a different world we live in. We've got healthy kids and a good wife and it might sound a bit fanciful but I believe if you've got it good, make the most of it and be appreciative because it could be a lot worse. Being a stay-at-home dad for me is a blessing and it is something that works for us, we enjoy our life. I've noticed that the children really get a lot from it and I get a lot from it. And my wife, we all get a lot as a family. It's our dynamic and it really works. The thing is it could all change tomorrow and I guarantee we would sit back here and say you remember those days when you were at-home-dad and mum was working. I'd say, 'You remember those days because it all goes so quickly doesn't it?' Before you know it, you'll be looking back at it as memories, so quit worrying about it in the moment. Enjoy it, and enjoy it for the best that it can be because I consider us blessed to be doing it. I know that the structure, the financial structure is set about and built by my wife and I have so much respect for her and more love than I can even describe because of what she does and how she does it to work like that. At the same time, I'm the bloke at home on a paternal level, a stay-at-home dad and all the things that come with that about being a dad.

Steven believes he naturally adapted to the role of SAHD and found joy within it, but he wanted more. He continued to build a business and work with the goal of one day becoming the breadwinner for the family. This juggling of roles is what he identifies as the one major difficulty with the adaptation of the role of SAHD.

Once I do admit that it is a brilliant thing, it's a blessing, it hasn't always been like that, there's definitely been days...my strife if I've ever had it with this situation is trying to start a business at the same time. When you are trying to start a business as a father of new children, that's where I found the challenge. Never ever did I look at it like, 'I can't do it. I hate it. Who dealt me this blow?' I knew it was a great thing, but I just put it down

to be it was a very, very big and interesting challenge to start with. Because if I hadn't started a business, if I'd just had something...because the nature of my business is residual income, you create something on the Internet and it becomes an automatic seller and you're making some residual income. I think if it had been on that level at the start where the money was coming in, I know for a fact I would have had more energy and more focus on the children. Whereas my initial stresses, if I'd call them that, with being a stay-at-home dad was purely I was trying to wear two hats. There's a time to work, and a time to be a dad. Once I'd got that clear, completely clear, then it became easier. Once I found a thing I really enjoy doing in my work life, which I do now, it became even easier because I knew I could separate things. But the thing I found the hardest is there still is probably that sense of being a man that you want to be the breadwinner, you want your wife to be at home. But at the start, I've definitely found that it was kind of like my test. The thing that had me kind of like scratching my head, saying, 'as much as I love this, it is really kind of a vivid and interesting challenge to build a business that can sustain a family in the realm of mine in the Internet.' So it was a very new thing and a lot of people didn't understand what I do even when I'd told them. So you had that kind of like new journey professionally in a realm that no one understands, with no family around to tell them about it. No brother here to talk about it. I've got mates but nobody understands it, at the same time I'm trying to face that challenge I'm also trying to be a solid stay-at-home dad. That was the challenge at the start. But, like I say, once I got the balance right, it's become something I think is better than I ever thought it could be.

As Steven talks, with his heavy British accent, he exudes a charisma that is very inspiring. He is feeling comfortable in the dialogue and shifts the conversation to his wife and her role as the cornerstone, or rock of the family. He speaks with a sort of reverence and his tone softens.

The whole strength and structure and foundation of this whole thing is my wife, doing what she does, being breadwinner like more of a conventional job that gives us the benefits and financial structure. The sort of solid base that lets us live this life. And I know it could change, that it's going to change, so because of that we are at a point where we feel ourselves very blessed. We live a different life than most of the people that we do know.

Steven picks up his glass and has another sip of his drink. He looks around the room. I am processing his thoughts and emotions. The ambivalence in his voice resonates with me and my own story. I sit back and wait for him to continue.

I only know you as a stay-at-home dad and that's why we relate because we know what goes on and what it's like, what it's all about. But our other friends they are in the other position, good for them, I'm pleased for them. Ours is just how it is and we've learned to

really appreciate it. You know it's a blessing and I'm a stay-at-home parent and everyone is like, 'ah, I wish I could do that.' I'm like, 'Oh yeah, it's cool, but have you tried to start a business at the same time? Have you tried to be a man? You know be the traditional man at the same time as you're trying to be the traditional mother but in a male form. It's hard you know? It is!' It is something that as a man, even though you want to go into it, it's not a balance...I think personally you're not genetically ready for. Not so much genetically but when I was growing up in England my dad would have to work. My mum did work but when it came down to it she stayed home and looked after us, and that's the way it was for us and that's what you know. But then you live in the world now and things change so quickly that you are either going to adapt and get used to it, things are going to change, deal with it. Or you won't...I can't handle that...that's not how it's done...that's not tradition...that's not how it's meant to be. I know I have friends in England who still think that. I have family members who probably think that. But the truth of the matter is it doesn't matter what anyone thinks, it never has done. It matters what works, and what works is what we've got and it's a brilliant thing. It had its challenges at the start but they were never challenges that I was confused by. I get why I'm frustrated. I get why I'm kind of...I just always wanted like the power, I always wanted to have control...but when you get put in this position I think immediately the control is like this ironic test. The control is taken away from you and you're thrown into this completely unique situation that you have to, as a man, adapt to. I think men can adapt to many things but this is something that when you are going out to the park with your diaper bag and your push chair and everyone there is a woman and you're the only dude, that is something that no matter how many times you do it, it always feels a little bit funny. At the same time you do come to a point where you're like, 'Yeah, I'm daddy day care driving around a minivan.' I actually thrive on that. I love it you know. I do. It is something that I consider myself very, very lucky...very, very lucky.

I understand exactly what Steven is saying and it echoes my experience. I remain quiet, not wanting to taint Steven's story and await the direction Steven chooses to take the conversation. Then, his introspection deepens as he explores the role's effect upon his masculinity.

I think also when you're a stay-at-home dad you see your children grow up as well. In a sense they grow up really quick and you are actually there seeing it, you realize it. I do. I'm glad and I feel honored to have that ability, that time to see the changes rather than being an observer from the outside. The other thing with Mary's job, she's got flexibility so she can be back there with me and we have so much family time that it's a real blessing. And you wonder where we've got those blessings in something as good as that with the initial challenges to start it off, like the challenge that I had trying to start a business and be a stay-at-home dad there were some challenges where I knew once I got through them, the rewards would be worth it. And they are, you know, they really are. You're not going to be given this, like there it is, it's great, go and enjoy it, believe being a stay-at-home dad is really cool and trendy, it's really easy. It wasn't easy. But you have



to make a decision, either I'm going to do it right...and I think another thing as well when you're a stay-at-home dad, you're not a stay-at-home mum with a dick. You know, you're a stay-at-home dad and that's where I find with a lot of people, they kind of think...and also women...they almost assume that because you're a stay-at-home dad you're going to think like a woman. Truth is, I don't think you do, I really don't think you do. And I see it as much with my wife, when she comes back, she has things she was thinking about that she would have done and I don't even think about...like that is not on my agenda. To me it is not important, and that's the difference between men and women. Women have things they find important, men have things they find important. There's obviously the core important things as a parent that we know, that we do but it's the quirky little things...I'm trying to think of examples but being a stay-at-home dad, you are a stay-at-home dad, you're a stay-at-home male. And if anybody tells me...if they ever insinuate that a stay-at-home dad is almost like you lose your masculinity, like that's bullshit. There's probably no other thing that you can do that should encourage masculinity. That's the kind of irony going. You can go and work on a building site or drive a truck and feel like a man. But you try being a man at home, raising kids...that's where the challenge is. That's the real challenge. That's where you separate people because you're a stay-at-home dad. If my wife was at home, cool, she's a stay-at-home mum and I wouldn't expect her to act the same way as I do. That's something that I think is changing in this day and age. The stay-at-home dad thing is becoming something you see more often, more people are doing it, more guys are doing it. And I think more people are becoming comfortable with it. Because I know at the start you'd see a stay-at-home dad and you'd be like...you'd go into the parks the first time and I remember going and chatting and there was a little boy and he fell off the steps and I was like, 'Hey mate' and I was trying to help him up. And his mum is freaked out and I'm like first thing...'Fuck you. I'm here with my kids. I've got more kids than you anyway. I'm juggling three little ones and you're having a head fit about one little baby. I'm trying to help you, you know. It's like who do you think you are? Try going and living in my shoes.'

Steven, as the SAHD, is multidimensional and fulfills many roles in his day-to-day life.

His experience has taught him the value of lucidly defining and separating his duties to perform each role at the highest level. He relishes in his family time and is grateful to his wife who provides the financial structure and heart of the home. He does not shy away from his masculinity, to the contrary, he believes using this masculinity as a SAHD is his greatest asset. Who knows, when you see a man in a minivan, window down, muscles blazing, Brit-rock blaring, it may just be him and you may think twice about living in his shoes.

## Daycare

Steven's passion is overflowing. He takes a few sips of his drink. He leans forward in his chair awaiting my next question. He is relishing in the discussion and I am enjoying myself as well. I ask if daycare was ever contemplated, especially as he attempted to start a new business.

Yeah. The only reason is because at the start I was trying to start this business. We did realize that it was a very, very hard thing to try and start a business just working in the evenings. We started literally with one day, let's just try and commit to one day where we can find someone to look after Mia, whilst to give you that day to start, to build your business. The hard thing about that in our instance, was it almost made it kind of harder because if you could have just said, I'm a stay-at-home dad, here's my bit, then you focus on that and you don't really focus anywhere else. But then we found that the crazy thing was we would have one day and some weeks...for a period of a couple of months it was maybe a Tuesday, so you have the weekend and Monday. Well, on Monday morning I'm here with Mia and getting used to being a stay-at-home dad, trying to keep my mind off of work. And then Tuesday, bam, it was my day trying to work. I'm in that work mode changing hats and the day goes so quick...oh the day goes so quick but it's like the evening or the afternoon and I have to go pick up Mia and so that means the next three days of being a stay-at-home dad. And that more than anything was like a shock to my system. Not that I didn't want to be a stay-at-home dad, almost like it was a cruel irony that you're there and you're given this opportunity of one day of the week to try and build a business, to try and do the thing and it's such a quick change from being a stay-at-home dad and suddenly switching full circle. And then the next morning you're trying to be a businessman, trying to build this Internet work. It would have almost been easier if I'd worked at McDonald's because at least you know what you're doing. You go to McDonald's or a restaurant and you know you're going to work for X amount of money per hour and then you come home. Ok, you've done your job; you've made your money. My thing was trying to build this self sustaining Internet business that had no guarantees but...I've always had these big dreams that I'm going to do unique things and it was the same...there's no difference with this. But it required a lot of energy and input; trying to be a stay-at-home dad which requires a different sort of energy. And then have some left at the end of the day, or the next day to try and do your business. That was the hardest thing. It was never, ever, ever hard being a stay-at-home dad. To me it was hard trying to commit enough and find that break off and say no, I'm a dad here and I'm doing this business here. But at the same time it wasn't like a conventional business like trying to build an airplane. This isn't going to fly soon, how do you do that in a day? And then the day would change and something would change with the babysitter where now it would be a Thursday; so you had three days of being a stay-at-home dad and then you try to start your business and then you're back to being a stay-at-home dad on Friday. The switching is the thing that threw me off, that really I found hard. Then what we did was we progressed a bit from there to a second day, which ironically didn't really make it easier in all honesty, it didn't, because at that time I was still framing the idea of what I

wanted to do with my business online. So I didn't have that kind of laser type goal like I do now.

And the other thing that was hard as well was I didn't want to have anyone else look after my daughter. I never wanted that, never. We understood that in the situation it was almost a necessary evil but we had to commit to saying now we've got to go ahead and let our daughter stay with a stranger and we never know. That's one of the reasons why it really must be good to have family around because doing that was something that broke my heart every day. I was the guy who would leave dropping off at the nanny's...the guy who would leave kind of angry. It pissed me off as a dad...like I shouldn't be dropping my daughter off here, it just didn't feel right. That was a tough thing, when you are a stay-at-home mum, you're a stay-at-home mum and that's it. But when you're a stay-at-home dad and you maybe have another thing you're trying to do, you know trying to switch those hats. I'm an emotional type person anyway, I didn't find it easy to do that quick switch and that is what I found very, very hard, until I found the comfort now of doing the thing that I want to do. That made it much, much easier. But at the start the whole nanny thing...and then of course, it's weird because my wife would go to the nanny and tell her what she wanted done. But then I would say, well what about what I want done because I'm the one who is like...some of the nannies would find it weird to have the husband say here's what I do and la la la. If you explain to them I'm a stay-at-home dad then it's like oh, ok. Plus, just being English half of them couldn't understand me anyway. It's almost easier to just say screw it and have a nanny five days a week. We got used to it. I think the thing we found with that is we've had in the space of four years...we've been blessed now with really good nannies. Our current nanny, she's brilliant, she's great to each of them and she's just a fantastic individual. I love it because I'm in the house and she's in the home with us. She's out looking after the children and I'm working but I'm around the children. Before, she took our children away out of the house. That was a horrible, horrible time. I know that people have to do that and I accept that but if I were given a choice, I would not want to do that. I want the nanny to come in the house.

Although Steven prefers having a nanny in the house on days he is working he believes it “brings up a whole new set of issues.”

It sounds kind of weird and sad to say but we had to talk about it, me and Mary...I mean, I'm a friendly person but I was always cautious about my interaction somewhat with nannies, especially the younger ones at our house because I didn't want to be in an American, it might sound paranoid somewhat, but in a litigious society. England was not, but America certainly is. I didn't want some kid in my house who I didn't know who they were, we vetted them as well as we could on care.com, somehow saying, 'Oh, the husband touched me or something like that, you know.' There are things you can't even...it's a whole other thing you start thinking and considering. It's not like something that you do every day but I was aware of it and Mary and I talked about it. It is so much easier if you don't have a nanny, but sometimes it is a necessary evil.

Worrying about interactions with nannies may be something a stay-at-home mom never worries about but for Steven it was a real concern. He then recounts another difficult incident that happened in a transition period between nannies after the birth of his third child.

I remember one time when Gary had just been born and all we could do at the time... We had this lady, this neighbor near us that was doing some babysitting. She was babysitting Chris and Mia and I remember going over there and they liked it but it was almost as though they didn't want to be there. We had to take Gary there and it was all ok. We didn't like them being out of the house but this is what we could find. It was a friend of a friend and we kind of trusted it. But I remember the day that I went over there and she didn't tell us but her husband, who we had met once, had lost his job. He was there at home helping her out. I remember I walked in...this is the day that I said Mary I went back to her, I almost drove back and said we're done. Nothing rude but we're done. I had to take Gary there in a seat, he was two months old, and hand him over to this guy. Because the woman wasn't there, she was down at the park with the kids and got delayed dropping her kids off so she couldn't be there. Normally I would go in and give him to her. But to give my newborn baby to a strange guy and say all right mate...and he was awkward, really awkward. I was like, 'Where's Rebecca?' and he was like, 'Oh, she got stuck at the school.' There wasn't anything either of us could do about it but I'm saying to myself being a stay-at-home dad is a blessing and you could be a stay-at-home dad where you don't have to do that. As a man, I think it's bad enough...I think as a woman there is that kind of maternal thing where a woman can say you can help me with my baby that's fine, woman to woman...but a man to man, me saying to this guy here's my baby and he felt awkward. He is holding my baby and I was like, I got in the car and I was on edge, driving. I stopped at the end of the street and I was like, 'Fuck this, I'm going back.' I phoned Mary and I said, 'I just couldn't do this.' Luckily as I looked behind, the woman pulled up and she went in. Mary phoned and we said, 'Seriously, you've got to tell us next time what is going on because no one should be put in that position.'

Now, I tend to look back at that whenever I'm having a time when I'm uncomfortable... Well, at least I'm the dude, those are my children with me. It was a very uncomfortable moment. These are things you learn.

And ever since, Steven and Mary have had a female nanny in their home with the children to care for them as Steven works on his business.

## **New Frontier**

Our conversation, at times, dips into the idea of a new masculinity, a resistance of the cultural norm, and how this plays out within familial and societal expectations. This task of

managing expectations is especially difficult for Steven because he is juggling American and English cultural norms while adapting to a new frontier of masculinity. I ask Steven what his brother, who lives in England, thinks of the SAHD role.

My brother is a firefighter. He does shift work. His wife is a police officer. They have two small ones. So, they have different shifts like that, crazy like two days off, two days on. The thing that was funny, I don't know that we've spoken much about it, but when I moved here... I'm an independent person, so is my wife. We are very much on our own. I wasn't a very family oriented person. I love family. I have a big family and I love being around them and having a laugh with them but coming here, I'm totally cut off. With our children... of course with me and Mary being independent we deal with it and... with my dad I think he is really, really proud of us, he is the one out of all of them... he is very like singing our praises and saying, 'Look at Steven and what he is doing.' Almost to the point that with Kenny, he would like... I remember at the start with my brother, he would have like his little boy and he'd be really frustrated and stressed out and I could understand where he was coming from but I'd gotten over that because I had been forced to become comfortable as a parent in every second of the day, in every way. It's not like when you have a family around and you're like hey mum, I'm bringing little Johnny over because I just can't handle it right now. Grandmothers, most of your mothers are like 'yeah, bring them over you know, you can come over here.' My brother, bless him, and I don't muck him for that in the slightest because I was the one who left and he is staying there looking after my parents and that... But I think when you've got family around, it's almost like delays your need to man up and be a proper stay-at-home parent, because you've got that crutch to fall back on. You want someone to say, you know what, I'm having a bad day, come and look after him. And that's not a bad thing, but I've never had that. So if I have a bad day, I have to deal with it or get over it until Mary gets back. So my brother, I think he thinks I'm probably crazy in a joking sort of way. But deep down, he probably admires it and is impressed that I am doing it. Because I wouldn't have been the sort of person you thought would do this when I was travelling around the world. I was very kind of like it's about me and I'm going to worry about me, not about my family at home. I didn't really... I wasn't looking after them much you know. But now it's made me a better man, it really has. And my brother can see that and I think he knows why it is because I don't have the support of the family unit around me. As much as it is probably nice, I don't. So he's seen the difference in our parenting skills... and also what's funny is that his wife sees it as well... and at the same time I've become very blasé, well... not blasé... very chill. I've got three little ones, I've got a fourth on the way and I'm more chill than anything. I certainly have my days but I just roll with the punches with the kids. I'm not saying that to be arrogant, I'm genuinely saying that's how I live my life. With the kids I will just ham it up, play, and have a laugh. Things happening, other kids may have a dad who says come on kids, that's bullshit, maybe shout at them or a little smack on the butt every now and then. But being forced to jump in the frying pan you've got to survive, you've got to learn how to deal with it. Whereas my brother's situation where he's got family around him, it's almost like your baptism by fire is much less, it's more of a gradual thing. So you're always having those waves of, oh I can't

handle it today. Well don't worry; so-and-so is here to look after you... your mum's here or your mother-in-law. Whereas I was just dumped right in the start, fine my decision, my choice, cool, but still dumped right in the deep end. It's like ok, once I got it kind of quickly, it allowed me to have a life now where I'm not too fazed about having a fourth child and my brother nearly fell off his seat and cannot believe it. Well, I can. But, I do miss, I wish he could see my family daily, and I would love to see his. That's the only downside of being here. But, you know, life is good.

Steven talks fast and I am absorbing a lot of information in very little time. I contemplate what he has said and think of my own brothers. Would they have ever expected me to be a stay-at-home dad? Never, and yet I think they respect it and like Steven I wish I had more time with them. For some unknown reason, I am drawn to Steven reporting that his dad "sings his praises" and wonder if he truly believes this. I also wonder if his dad has adapted to this new masculinity which manifests in the SAHD role. I ask him. Steven responds with a sigh. Then he focuses on how his relationship with his father has impacted his behavior with his own children.

Well, I wouldn't say he sings praises. My dad is not the sort of person... he is a man of few words... he is not an ass licker. He's not someone who will blow smoke up your ass. He's just not like that. So you know if he says something, he means it. I remember I was a soccer player as a kid and I desperately wanted to be a professional in England and I desperately wanted my dad to say, 'You'll do it.' And, he honestly wasn't... it wasn't that he was a bad man but he won't give you false shit, he won't pick you up if you're not deserving. And he is very, very critical because he wants you to become good. I'm the opposite; I fall over myself singing my kids praises. I want them to have total confidence, they can fall and I'll say it's brilliant. I want them to know that everything they do is magical. Because it's not like I'm trying to give them a sense of false ego but as a kid I didn't get that. I think I craved it, particularly in football. So my dad, when I was a kid, he was very, very hard to please, but a lovely man. I remember one time he said, 'you did well. I liked what you did.' I remember hanging on to that one word; it was like dad told me that I did well. So much so, that when I had kids I'm over here on my own, I don't know, I just... I think he sees it, he's always sort of known it, but he says it now in terms of how I am to my brother.

Steven pauses, appearing unsure what his dad thinks. He looks around the restaurant and pauses for a few more seconds which seem to be years contrasted with the pace of our conversation. He continues.

So my dad is just like...I guess he really does sing my praises but I can tell he is really, really proud of how I handle it. Not just how I handle it but how I'm living. I know he is like...he said to my mum once when we were younger...I'm really...because in our area where I grew up, unbelievably, it's like the heroin capital of England...it's a smaller town but a lot of kids I went to school with had mental issues, or drug addictions...it almost feels like me and Kenny had this kind of protection over us...my dad said I'm so paranoid for our two boys because I see all these friends who have kids that go off track and he said I couldn't have two better boys. And my mum told us that and we were like, 'really dad said that, fuck, you know?' That's really cool. And I think that's why as a parent I can see why he did what he did. Traits of his absolutely come out of me. Even though you say you'd never do it, you cannot help but be like your dad. I'm sure I look in the mirror and see my dad looking back at me because I do stuff that he did to me. My dad always said to me as a kid, 'I want you as you grow to be better than me.' All parents want their children to improve upon them and I've always remembered that. I see why he said it, and I know that I have. I want my children to be 10 million times better than me and I know it would be brilliant for them to be good people, good wives, good husbands, good friends you know. I know when he talks to my brother about what I'm doing here, he says, 'Kenny, you can't say a damn thing about how hard it is having children, look at your brother.' And it's kind of like Kenny wants to slap me in the face because he says dad said this good about you and I laugh because I know that my dad is very, very respectful and it makes me happy to know that he thinks that. He doesn't have to say it to me but when he says it to other people I know he feels proud of me. I'm his eldest son, so it's good.

It is evident that Steven respects his father and his opinion. He seeks that admiration as do most sons of their fathers. There is no doubt that he feels a sense of pride in what he is doing and how he is living. I continue to focus on fathers and ask if Mary's dad has said anything.

Mary's dad is a brilliant man. He is a brilliant, brilliant man. I think of her dad as this, almost like a pearl in a shell. He's unique. He's got brilliance but he's locked in a shell. Sometimes he comes out and you see it like that's impressive. Unfortunately the way things are in his life for various reasons, he doesn't live the life that he deserves. That doesn't mean that he's not one of the best men that I've ever met. At the start, he was one of the people who gave us sanity when we were first married. Because her mum is a different lady and different issues, she's not my cup of tea. I love her, she's Mary's mum...but her dad he was a man whom I could talk to when I first came here. And because of that, he has given me a perspective of being a father because I know his relationship with Mary is a love that has been replicated with me and Mia. Because I've never had girls in my family, I always wanted to have a sister, so I always wondered what it would be like if I had a daughter. I always wanted a daughter and I saw how he interacted with Mary, especially when I first met her. I know that the majority of my...the way that I am with my daughter is responsible from him, the way he is with Mary. He is a good man, he is a loving man. He's got a lot of love in his body, in his heart, he really does. When he has his quirky times it's almost like, 'oh Nathan, that's not

you.’ But when he is his real self, he is such a good man you know. I think that’s a good man to have as a father for a girl and a lot of his traits I take on. I know that he’s said to me...he always comments about how proud he is of us and I know he thinks I’m cool. I think he’s happy that I married his daughter because he sees it as my dad sees it, how we are working as a unit to bring up a family.

Suddenly the conversation takes an interesting twist and he discusses the feedback he has received from his mother and mother-in-law regarding the role of SAHD.

I don’t know if it is the same for you, but I know some people who say that it’s the mums I think because they are mothers themselves...at least in our family, and I love them dearly...who have this critical view of how you are. Maybe it’s all mums, unless someone was completely happy in herself, has handled the menopause, and is in a good place in their life, women will always have a problem with their daughters-in-law. I just think that’s how it is. That’s kind of like maybe a generalization but in my experience, unless a woman is 100% happy in herself, she will always find things to be unhappy about and frustrated. And, I don’t like gossip and I don’t like drama but I pick up on it. I find that there are dads who are kind of happier in their life; they are just pleased to see us doing this. Our mothers are pleased to see us but they are more like well, I wouldn’t do this and I don’t know if the kids like us or don’t see us as much as they like us or whatever. So I think their perception of us as parents is clouded with the bullshit they think about it. If you get down to the bare facts they would all say the same thing as our dads that we are doing an incredible job under our circumstances; which of course we chose these circumstances. We weren’t forced into this. We made this decision. Some of these are harder, if you’ve been around the family in some respects but we made this decision, and here we are, and they know that we are doing a good job at it. I always think that you pick up traits from your parents, and even your in-laws of things that are going to be beneficial; either traits that you pick up or traits, things that you could pull in and have them in your life as a parent. Our parents have got good qualities that I’m only too happy to learn from, and they’ve got qualities as well that I’m only too happy to dismiss.

Steven apologizes for digressing as he leans back pondering, takes another sip of his drink, and lets out a sigh. He begins to discuss those who may resist change or progress; those who may look down upon a stay-at-home dad.

I wonder, with my parents and Mary’s parents, I’m sure that they questioned the whole role with our family, me being a stay-at-home dad. They would never say it to my face because they know that they’d get an answer back. Not in a rude way but if you want to talk about it, I don’t mind. Because when you are a couple starting life on your own, you do what you’ve got to do, that’s what me and Mary do. I wonder deep down if they have...more her mum...as I said the people that I see that like to throw stones...I think the things that we do are an easy target for unhappy people...people that want to point the



finger. People are like stay-at-home dads, people are like that role reversal, that they have in their lives...I'd go as far as to say anyone who lives a different life, maybe who someone who it used to be covered up...people that are gay. People like to point a finger at that. They don't have the right...they don't even understand it. They can't get it because a lot of people have their head stuck in a way that life is like this, it has always been like this, and change comes along and changes society and people's beliefs; who they love, who they like, what they like, how they live their life, how they are as a parent; a lot of them can't handle it. They can't just be happy for other people, they can't just accept that things change and people change. I think successful people have...at least for stay-at-home parents, they understand about other people saying life's changed, this has all changed. You can either roll with it and allow it to enhance your life, or you can be one of these people who live in the past and are never happy with progression.

Discussion of the resistance to change, heightens our circular dialogue, and brings the conversation back to his childhood and how it impacts him today.

When I was in England, I grew up in the 80s and 90s and it was very full like that. People were like, 'we should just live with what we know. That guy has a black car; did you know that he was gay?' I remember being a kid and thinking, 'Well, who gives a fuck?' Because I lived in this village where if you were different you were immediately...you were different, you were an outcast. And me and my brother were different there. I bring my differences with me outside in my village. I remember it gave me so much agony, so much angst, so much pain. I only ever fit in because I started playing football with these arseholes. Much as I love the place I grew up in, I couldn't wait to get out of there. It gave me a sense of, first of all, what I look for in a person: decency, honesty, love and respect. It's made me the person that I am, ironically, all that crap that I went through as a kid has made me who I am today. It's made me the parent that I am today. It is kind of weird but I'm with my kids and I'm so very protective. All parents are protective but sometimes I doubt, I get tripped out by some of them, I'm like... 'are you people really this nice' where you've got to second guess everyone. 'Are you really selling that, or is that your true motive there?' When I first moved to America I remember thinking everyone is so happy and so friendly here it's almost not genuine. It tripped me out. Everyone is so friendly with 'how are you and have a nice day.' You don't have any of that in England. So I was always very conscious and kind of suspicious of people. I didn't want to be because it was very refreshing to travel and meet good people and realize that the world is a good place and there are good people around. I thought that is something that as a stay-at-home parent when I've got my kids now I want to make it a point for all of them to know that when they are with me they are safe. That we can go and say hello to people and say 'Hey, how are you guys doing?' And we have a very jovial outlook about things. I want them to feel comfortable, because I know as a kid I wasn't. I was never like that. You didn't know...it was weird in that little village. I never saw my parents have that kind of free, 'Hey guys, how are you?'...you know they had a small group of friends, but you never felt good around town and have more friends. That made a big impression on me. I don't want to have kids who feel like they can't just have this gregarious, outgoing attitude and be friendly to everyone and have people respond

back to them because it wasn't like that for me. I loved meeting people, that's why I had to get out of England. I had to get out of that village. I was just claustrophobic. I had to get out and meet people for my personality and let myself grow emotionally. In like a man sort of way, I needed to get out and become a man. Then it made it the right time for me to do... and because of that, because of that I can become a stay-at-home dad without a second thought of whether or not I should be doing it. Because I'm totally cool with who I am. I'm cool with where I'm at. I'm cool with who my friends are. I'm happy with where I'm at in life. It is like when you've got all that going for you and you're happy, you could be told you know...go and sweep the streets and be a trash man and it would be ok, it would be cool, you know? Because the things that matter are all taken care of. I'm happy with myself. I'm happy in my life, happy with my friends, love my children and my family and you know so...to me being a stay-at-home dad is like another blessing. You get the honor of raising your children and at the same time helping your wife, helping your family as a unit. Bear in mind when you are a stay-at-home dad, you're progressing, you're moving your family along, you're moving, everything is moving forward because you're willing to take on that role of like...I could never be like, 'Fuck all. I couldn't possibly be a stay-at-home dad. You should be doing that babe, I'm a man, I need to go out and get a job.' To me, it's like in this day and age, you think like that, you just close so many doors. You've got to open the doors and be like...do what you've got to do, be what you've got to be, whatever it may be enjoy it, just take it in two hands and fucking fly with it. Being a stay-at-home dad is one of those things where I'm flying. It's a blessing; it's a total blessing.

Steven has blazed new frontier throughout his life. It has been a recurrent theme in which he has weathered the storm and conquered as an outsider in a foreign community as a youngster, a country as an adult, and currently the role of a SAHD. Despite his success there is no arrogance, there is no grandiosity, only humility. Our discussion quickly evolves into the discussion of parental roles.

### **Parental Roles**

As we talk I am invigorated. I enjoy the conversation and become very intrigued to learn the familial division of labor and designated roles within the relationship of Steven and Mary. I wonder how they assign them. Are they traditional in other aspects of the division of familial labor?

I would say that the roles of parenting, at least now, are almost identical in the jobs that we do. I could do all the things that she does and she could do all the things that I do; certainly in my own way, and certainly in her own way. But we know how we want to be

as parents. Of course you have your individuality and you do things a certain way, but when it comes to a solid role in how we want to be as parents, how we want to be seen as parents, how we want to bring our children up, both of us are 99%, you could switch her out for me just with a different personality. The role would never change, we know what rules and boundaries and roles we have as parents.

I think in our situation, the role is defined. You could switch us out and we'd still have the core roles of being parents, we've got them down and we know what we expect. At the same time, there's that 1% where my personality comes out, my styles come out, and my wife's come out. Some examples are: I'm kind of more quirky, I like to goof around and mess around. I love just playing, giggling, laughing, messing around; and there's always a line...where you draw a line. I love to have a good laugh. And I like for my kids to be that with me. I've noticed my wife lately she's been chilling a lot more, she's gone through a few stressful things at work. She's become very more...kind of...she'll actually come in really bubbly and our children really respond to that. I think that I maybe have a style in the roles that I play and Mary has her own style, she doesn't cross over but she'll mimic me. Sometimes I notice that she just thinks a certain way in her roles and I've found myself adopting that when I've seen that it works. But things that she's done a certain way, she's spoken a certain way and I thought, yeah that's cool, I like how she does that. And also in the evenings we will sit and talk about the kids and we always tend to talk about things they've done and laugh about their personality traits and it always comes around to discussing a certain way that she's done something or a certain result that she's gotten and how she's handled a certain situation. Not every night, but we tend to learn a lot from each other in how we approach things like that. To the core roles, we could interchange, we do it with our style, but the role is defined, it's very, very clear. Because we don't want to send a mixed message. As I said though, there is that 1% where I'm more like...I'm very kind of clean and tidy, when I cook for example, whereas Mary, my wife, when she does it, she thinks she's a professional cook. She'll leave crap everywhere. I'll clean up and I want my house clean and at night I want the kids put to bed then we have an adult area where the candles are on and I can have a glass of wine and chill out with my clean place. My wife, she's got all her stuff leftover from work and she'll come home and her style is to cook beautiful dinners, but she'll have crap everywhere because she thinks she is like a professional cook and she's going to have people come around and clean up afterward.

There are these little things in the roles like cooking where she'll do that. But they are just quirks that would still be there whether we have kids or not it, would be the same thing. On the whole, I think our roles are very, very defined, we know what each other expects. We know what each other is good at. We know the style of parenting each other has got with our personalities. I like that because I think sometimes people think that if you're a stay-at-home dad or a stay-at-home parent...I've heard people say this, I've heard women say this...in fact, I heard a woman talking today...you know nothing malicious but just saying how her husband doesn't realize or he has a certain thing he doesn't care about but she's anal about this and he doesn't even hardly know she's doing it or whatever, in terms of being a parent. It's no big deal, but I thought to myself it's funny because in our situation, we know what the other one does and what the other one is doing because we have strict ideas as parents that really run along parallels, really

along the same lines. What I think, she thinks and vice versa. There's no kind of major changes. It's almost like...it definitely is a relationship with two people who love each other, two people who have children in the world and it's like ok...our commitment as parents is the same, same guidelines, same guidance...we certainly have different personalities, we certainly have different quirks and traits but when it comes to raising children, this is like the black and white area. That's how I grew up you know. My dad, the only thing he changed different from my mum, is that he would allow me and Kenny to have girls in our bedroom at a younger age. My mum was anti that and that is something that maybe me and Mary will be discussing but my dad was like...all right that's ok; he'll be all right. My mum was going crazy like there are no girls in this house. Otherwise my parents knew they pretty much had this solid foundation of how it was going to be. And you could drop my dad in, or drop my mum in, or take one out or the other and the machine would still run. We knew black and white in our house, that role was there...we knew how it was going to be. Like with me and Mary, my wife goes out at night, she has to have dinner meetings for her job and of course I train clients that I go to see, we do stuff like that. And it doesn't matter; the only thing that our children miss is being there together as a unit. But it doesn't mean that they suddenly go off the track and they can't function...they run amuck and go crazy. That doesn't happen...there are rules, you know. We have time for a laugh and enjoy ourselves of course but rules wise in our family, it is defined. It doesn't matter if it is me at home as a stay-at-home dad or my wife at home as a stay-at-home mum, when I'm out during the day or something. The function is still there.

Steven recalls how he felt when he first became a SAHD. He questioned himself “deep down” by contemplating if roles must be done a certain way.

I was probably wondering about roles and should I do things a certain way. Then I thought to myself, this could be so complicated in itself, I don't need to sit and try to think is there a certain way to be a stay-at-home dad. I was like all I know is I love my kids. I've always been a believer that you'll learn as you go if you have the guts to try something and the guts to go with it. You'll have hiccups and there will be learning curves but you'll be all right. I've always been all right when I've taken a chance in my life. Being a stay-at-home dad there will be nerves at first certainly, that's to be expected. But it's like, this has been put in front of me. This is on my plate, go and enjoy it and deal with it. That's the thing, I make sure that I enjoy it. If I start making an issue, like what do I need to do, how do I need to do this...I'll do it my way, I'll be myself and I'll be my children's dad. I won't be some guy who is trying to work and have this and does that. I'm my kids' dad and this is how I am, this is who I am, this is how I do it. Honestly, on the whole, it has been a walk in the park, it's been a pleasure. We've certainly had ups and downs as I've said to you before trying to juggle starting a job. That's no reflection ever on being a stay-at-home dad, that is a reflection on trying to start a new business at home in an industry that is very, very new. That was its own issue. It was never, ever because I was a stay-at-home dad that it was hard. There was a little bit of confusion but it would have been hard even if I didn't have children, it would have been a bloody hard thing to do. It just so happens that is what I chose to do with my job. When it came to

being a parent I just said I've got to make it to the point very, very quickly where I just cut this off and say being a parent is parent. Even Mary says what you're going to find is that it is going to be easier, and it will help you say that you have your work time and you have your stay-at-home dad time and she was right. Because at the start you're in that male phase where you're like I've got to get this business going because I've got to be the man. I've got to be the breadwinner. At other times it was like, even though we could do this, we were exploring the possibility if my thing would take off quickly so that'll end up that Mary can come home and be the stay-at-home mum. That hasn't happened because of various issues that were unforeseen. It didn't take off quickly and, therefore, we just said properly, you are the stay-at-home dad. I said, cool. Now I know that, I'm cool with it. I separate the two, and it has been the easiest thing and the best thing that I've done. Just separate the two. I think there can be no bigger commitment or perfect commitment to be a parent, whether it is a male or a female; I stay at home, there is no greater commitment, there is no greater responsibility, there is no greater honor. Sometimes you can get into confusions and the problems come when you try and mix too many things together. I think being that stay-at-home dad is like your other stuff stops.

The passion that exudes from Steven is contagious. I am feeling inspired by what he is saying. Then, Steven shifts in his chair and has another sip of his drink. He begins to recall a story of a man he met at a seminar a few years ago, a story that has had a profound impact upon him and learning to separate the various roles he is juggling.

This man was talking about how he would be on his computer trying to do his thing, a bit of work, and his son came in the office and said, 'Daddy, can you come and play trains' or something. He was in the zone and... I know this... he said, 'Sorry, buddy I can't do it right now, but I'll do it later' and he turned around and saw his son walk out of the room. I remember almost crying when I heard that. It really hit me hard. Ironically, two years later I did the same thing and I caught myself doing it. I turn around and I put the computer down, I switched it off and said, 'fuck that.' This computer here, my job is not even close to being as important as my children. I said that kind of made me think you've got to separate. And I did, I went out and played with my son. We had a good time. And I just thought, you've to be real careful, you've got to separate because if you get stuck in that thin layer you put pressure on yourself to become a breadwinner at the same time as your role as a stay-at-home dad. That collusion is just too much, it can't happen. You've got to take the stay-at-home dad job almost more seriously than you would a real job, because on a real job you get paid and you do whatever you do and good for you. When you are home with kids, you are raising a human being. I cannot think of any other greater honor as a man, or as a human than my job to raise children. I can't think of another one, there isn't another one. It's an absolute honor and you should take it as that and say the rest will come.

Once again, Steven focuses on Mary and the necessity of a strong marital unit, leaving out the ego, to make the role as SAHD easier. He believes it is the parental unit that makes the difference.

When you are in a lucky enough position to have a wife that is taking care of the financial things so we can build our family, raise a family, and do it as a couple. There's never an individual thing like, 'Steven, you're at home with the kids enjoying yourself while I'm out working.' It's never like that. From the start it was challenging enough that Mary knew that it wasn't this enjoyable...it wasn't like immediately enjoyable. There was a bit of a transition, one that I was prepared to make, but of course you have that transition, so it's hard. Once we knew that each of us was taking this seriously, you could see that we are a committed couple, we love our children and our family unit right now works. Me, I look after our children in the day and my wife has a great job because she's brilliant at what she does. She is incredibly intelligent; she is the best at what she does. So she is getting well rewarded for us to allow us to have this unit. And in the day for me it's like, however you do it, you're doing it with your partner, your loved one. You love each other. I mean, I met my wife when I travelled. I knew the minute that I saw her that she was the one for me. That was my foundation. We could have lived in a tent in the garden. It was like, it's you and me and however we do it, we are going to do it. Whatever our roles are, we'll do it. It just so happens that my role is as a stay-at-home dad, fine. I'm honored by it. I've become more and more aware of the brilliance of it over the last five years. My wife's current role is that she's a breadwinner. And that's cool because at the end of the day, we do it together. I would be concerned if somehow I had to be a stay-at-home dad and I didn't have her because even though I'm at home with what some people see as, oh, you're a stay-at-home dad that must be nice. It's like of course it's nice, you're with your kids you know! But let's be serious it's not like you wake up and look at the birds singing and you roll out of bed and float downstairs. I get up and my day just nearly goes and I love it. I love it...I said to myself, just love it Mary, and enjoy it because they'll grow up quickly. But it's crazy the second the sun comes up it is crazy. And I know it has been crazy but with the fourth coming I'm like bring it on, I'm ready for it, I love it. It's a blessing and I get up and my day is crazy but I've become good at multitasking and I never was before. I've got these things down how I do this. You know it works because I've committed to it. It's not like I half-ass this, I'm not someone who just floats through with oh Mary, what do I do? I'm a man, this is your role, I can't handle it, No! I was like this is my responsibility, what a blessing, it is a big challenge but if I couldn't handle it, it wouldn't be put in front of me. I love it now. I get into that thing. Certainly it's never been easy but it's certainly been something that we've done together as a couple and it works in our family and in our life. I have no regrets in the slightest, none whatsoever. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, best thing...that and

meeting my wife. That's the thing that starts. I knew if we built this foundation and whatever we did together, we were going to make it a success. Ironically, it just so happens that the first few years now of our relationship with children, I'm a stay-at-home dad, and she is working. If I hated her, if we had a bad marriage, then maybe I could probably say there would be some issues there. It would be a challenging, bloody thing. Luckily, I don't. I love her.

Steven has mentioned that a friend is divorcing. He sees the impact of this and it lingers on his mind as he advances further.

I look at it like this, if you're having a family you know it is hard and of course you're not living in paradise, really, it doesn't work like that. Obviously there are people that get divorced and I feel for them really deeply because I think to myself you've got enough love to come together and have children and you go through that change where you hate each other and you want to split up, that there to me will just destroy your children I feel. It has just torn that family unit up. My belief is I've always believed when you marry, you marry the right... I waited. I knew I would meet that one woman and be blown off my feet and after that there'd never be anyone else. I knew because of that, when we had children... I was never desperate for kids but I was like, if it happens I'll be cool with it. Because I was with the right person and I knew we would create a unit. Because you create a unit with someone you love, I think that all comes with that... the ability to say 'however it has to happen, that's cool because we are doing it together.' With me being a stay-at-home dad, if you'd asked me about it before I met my wife I would have found it really hard to believe that. I'm a traveler. I'm travelling the world and living it up... you tell me I'm going to be a stay-at-home dad in the future. But of course when you meet that person your head changes and you fall in love and you realize that you've met the right person who gives you that kind of balance, and then to me, it's like all the other things that seemed weird at one time, become possible. Being a stay-at-home dad, which in the past living in England I never saw as a kid growing up, I wouldn't even know how to tell that stay-at-home dad when I was young. I've never seen that in my life. Now it's like, it is just something where you just keep walking, keep moving, your feet keep moving in front of you like taking a stride and that's it. Because I'm not doing it on my own, I'm doing it with the person that I love, the person who is supporting me, my wife; if you're gay, your husband, your significant other. You say, I love you, we're a unit and we're in this together, no matter how on earth you do it, it's going to be cool and we're going to do it. I've made that commitment, when Mary and I did have our brief discussion we knew it was going to be this, I was like, 'Babe, I want you to know I'm not troubled by this.' There's a few questions I would have asked you, what would you advise from your point of view because my wife... she's very, very good, very maternal like all women become when they have children. And me and her talked about it but when she left that day and it was the first kind of days of being a stay-at-home-dad, I remember thinking this is my thing, this is what I've been given. Even though you don't see it at the time, probably most people wouldn't think of it that way, I almost think to myself, I feel like I've won the lottery. I've won the lottery and I'm a very, very lucky

man. We should ask them to sing that song, *Lucky Man*, I play that all the time because I truly feel almost by default in a kind of ironic way I always end up being very lucky. And to be able to be a stay-at-home parent...because I look back and see from my daughter when she was first born, maybe about 2 or 3 years old I'd sit there teaching her how to stand up on this...and I now talk to her in bed and say, 'Babes, you don't remember but I remember'...I tell her, 'I used to have you on here and hold on and try and make you stand up and hold up.' I can tell her everything, I can share these experiences. I've got some experiences with my children, in these past five years that could fill about 100 books and it's all stored in my head of things that I'll never, ever forget. I've had the honor to raise my children instead of being a father who comes back late at night and says, 'Hey, I'm a dad and here I am.' Times have changed and I was willing to change with them and say I'll make the most of this; I'll make the best of this. Lo and behold being a stay-at-home dad has been and always will be one of the biggest I think honors that a man can have. If he realizes that, if he doesn't start saying I should go out and be the breadwinner. You give me the option of being the breadwinner or raising children in the house when you're also trying to build a business, there is no comparison. As far as I'm concerned, that there is the hard one, raising children at home that, if you're blessed to be given that opportunity, are you man enough to take it? Or will you crumble and be like, oh my wife has to do that. Fucking man up and say I've been blessed, here I go.

For Steven and Mary, maintaining individuality without compromising the mission of the team is extremely important within the family dynamic. Steven, being an ex footballer, understands the importance and necessity of defining individual and familial roles to allow the unit, the family, to function at a high level. And, above all else, it appears the love that is felt and expressed between Steven and Mary is the cornerstone to their happiness as a family

### **The Typical Day**

I am interested in learning about Steven's day to day lived experience as a SAHD. I ask him to describe what the typical day may entail.

Typical day. I've got it definitely streamlined now and it's become a lot more, it's always been enjoyable, but I really can handle it now. A typical day for us would be, I've got three little ones and another on the way, get up and do the morning together, me and my wife, and that is kind of like we get up and have breakfast together, we get up and get them dressed, teeth done that kind of thing. Then my wife will typically leave at a certain time, some days she leaves at 8:00 and some days she leaves early. Potentially we get up and get ready and from there my daughter goes to school; so I take my daughter to school quickly and then I come back and the boys are there and the boys and I will invariably do something around the house for about half an hour. We will do crafts, play toys, build stuff, do drawing, Play-Doh, whatever it may be but it's usually something at home. On



occasion we will go out very early if we've got something we want to do, we may go to a kid's play area or the Science Museum or the Aquarium. We go early because we have to pick my daughter up at 11:35 [kindergarten], so the morning is very much me and the boys. We will go to the park for an hour or so...sometimes we have errands to run, they love going out with me to the stores because they think they are going to get to go to the Dollar Store and get a little toy or something. We will go out and do errands together and it really is very much the hours of 9:00-11:30, it is me and the boys and then we go and pick up my daughter from school. We get her at 11:45, we come back and I let them do something, they'll either read or play together. They may play with the boys together or all play together, or my daughter may get a little time on her own. That's when I prepare lunch. We tend to eat around about 12:15. We all sit down and have lunch together from 12:15-12:45 or maybe 1:00. At 1:00 my daughter goes to her room and has quiet time, sometimes my oldest son will go with her. They'll hang out in her room together. They will sit quietly and read books and they do now with me, they will sit quietly. Or maybe I'll put my eldest son for a quiet rest time in his room. My youngest goes down for like a 2-hour nap, or almost 2 ½ hours, because he needs that, he is at an age where he needs it. Then around about 2:30, I allow my children after an hour and a half of rest time that they call it, maybe we will watch one of their cartoon shows, or they'll do Legos, drawing, that kind of thing. Then my wife is usually home around that time, around 4:00 and I'll start preparing dinner on the days that I'm doing dinner. My youngest son will get up and we have this schedule where, the days that I have them during the day, they may have gymnastics or an art school activity. Anyway, we kind of get ready to go to that. And that's the day really. That's basically the plan. It does deviate a bit from that sometimes where we do some things a little bit differently. But as it is, that's how we do it.

Steven seems to be a go with the flow kind of guy, a man who traveled without an agenda, letting the tide take him to the next shoreline. He has been free and spontaneous; therefore, I am a little surprised by Steven's description of a structured daily routine. I ask him about that.

It sounds structured because I'm trying to tell you what it is like now, but I've found for me, I prefer to have it...I like a bit of routine. I do like to have that ebb and flow of doing things off the cuff while we are out, but I like it to have some sort of structure. I mean at least the dinnertime structure for me; I've got to have that structure. Because that is when Mia gets back, at 11:45, so I know that is our structured lunchtime. And for me, it helps me get through the day by breaking it into bite-sized chunks. Even though it is a thrill to have my kids for the day, it is such a blessing, if I thought ok here's 6 or 8 hours and suddenly I have to fill it up, I can't think of it like that. I need that this time I'm doing this; this time I'm doing this, this time I'm doing this. In the past it was hard because it was almost as though, with my business, the way my business is, working from home, I couldn't switch off my work mind even though I should be since I was with the kids, I really should switch it off. It was always like, in the back of my head. So I was kind of fluctuating between trying to be a stay-at-home dad and things that would come up on the work side, I'd quickly run into the office and send an email. When I got more structured

in my time, I could handle that a lot better. I could say I don't need to do that right now, the work stuff can wait. Because I've got a structure based around me and the children on the days that I have them, and the structure has helped me.

I relate to Steven as he describes the difficulty of working at home and separating work-dad from SAHD. I understand that structure provides boundaries for the roles. I am still curious to know more regarding Steven's preparation for the day. I ask him if he thinks about the plan the night before.

No, most times I don't. There will be sometimes where something needs to be addressed that day and my wife and I will talk about it, maybe there is something they need to do for school or something that the nanny has asked them to do. We have a nanny three days a week. No, when I do it, it is like whatever takes my fancy the next day. It may well be that some nights I'm like, you know what, tomorrow morning...matter of fact, last week I thought tomorrow morning we'll get up and they've got this new drawing, and I like to draw with them. So I thought we will get up tomorrow and start the day with drawing and doing some pictures. And also I think because it was Valentine's Day, and because my wife's birthday and my daughter's birthday are coming up, we made a plan, we had an agenda to do birthday cards. That was preordained something we were going to do so yeah, that was something we look forward to. It's not like my day can't function if I don't plan it the night before. I very much get up and say right, it is my day, and what do I fancy doing today?

I am curious if it is easier for Steven in the summer or winter to plan the days.

Summer, I think, because you can go outside. As you know we need as much time as you can. I think summer is easier because we can go out, and I like to get the kids out. Even in the winter because we are in Colorado we obviously have that nice weather and a lot of times you can. But lately it has been cold and we haven't gone out as much as I'd like to. But summer definitely; with it being so nice and warm, it is a fraction easier in the summer.

When the weather turns bleak and cold it makes for what feels like longer days to fill the time. In desperation to break up the winter routine Steven describes a catch-22 of visiting various indoor play areas.

I don't like to get out so much in the winter. I try to because I feel like the kids need fresh air but I much prefer the summer where you can get outside. Because you go to these places like playgroups...we went to this one...the name of it is the WOW museum and every time I've been there, and every time, I go with the boys they always get sick. And I'm such an anal...I'm not a germophobe, but every time I've gone there I try to wash

their hands with sanitizer and keep them clean but they always, always come back, and like Gary will...they'll be sick. Like last Friday the weekend we got back he was sick. And me and Mary were like, God here we go again. And that is one of the reasons why honestly I think I prefer the summer as well because you're outside. My kids are never sick during the summer. And I do like the summers because I'm sick and tired of my kids being sick. Maybe they shouldn't get sick all the time but it is almost like you can't help it. Your kid is going to get sick but when you go to the sort of places it is almost like you are guaranteeing that they're going to get sick, you know. I'm sure it's getting along with their immune system but it is so bloody frustrating.

Steven then makes observations about the stay-at-home moms' behaviors at the play areas and the experience of being the only dad in the facility.

You go to these places and watch these mums and they are like...there is a big sign that says if your kid chews a piece of Lego, clean it and put it in this big tub. Well I got there, and I'm sitting next to this tub, this dirty tub, and there's one piece of Lego. I was like there's 50 mums in here today and you're telling me that out of 50 mums only one piece of Lego got chewed? I was like, I'm the only dad and my kids are messing around and I'm putting pieces of Lego in there. I cleaned what I could with my wipes but I'm like, this needs to be cleaned. I was thinking I know my kids are going to get sick. I shouldn't be sexist but I was thinking to myself, you mums should know better.

Over the course of Steven's journey as a SAHD he has discovered that a basic structure that allows for some improvisation provides his children with an atmosphere that allows them to thrive, know what to expect, and maybe most importantly, create that division between stay-at-home and working dad for him and his children.

## **Societal Response**

We shift the topic of conversation to the varied responses that SAHDs get from segmented populations. First, Steven focuses on individuals from older generations. He states, "I always find old couples that are so sweet and respectful, polite, and they're very open towards me. They're very sweet to the kids." Next, he shifts to women, and finally, other stay-at-home dads.

I do find women, and I can somewhat understand I suppose, having said that, maybe I can't in this day and age where there are more stay-at-home dads, you kind of get the sense that if you talk to them, they will talk to you. But it's almost as if they are kind of

standoffish a lot of times. I don't know if they are judgmental or not but they are not as talkative as I used to think, being from England, American people would be. I think to myself, a lot of these women, they won't talk to you but I look at them and most of these women are too freaking busy gossiping with their mate or they are on their cellphone or whatever, texting or... I go to gymnastics class with the kids and they'll be sitting there and they literally all come in and whip out their laptop or their iPads and I'm the only guy watching these kids. I'm thinking maybe it's cool that I don't talk to these people because I'd rather enjoy what my kids are achieving and doing, than getting sucked into conversations. I do find that in terms of something that I observe, I'm surprised that being a stay-at-home dad there's a lot more women, even if they're warm towards you, I think they're kind of like he is a guy, he's a male. Something that I've noticed as I've gone out a few times I've met, one time last summer, I met a guy at a park and he was a stay-at-home dad and he came over and started talking probably because he was like, there's another guy, thank God! We started chatting at the park and all the women were kind of looking at us, you could tell that they were. But we were the ones out there playing with our kids and they were standing in the shade and me and this guy are out there doing our thing with our kids and getting involved. Sometimes I do feel like there is kind of a standoffish, judgmental attitude from a lot of women more than I thought that there would be. I can somewhat understand in this day and age there seems to be... you know you hear these bad stories about what happens to children and I guess I can understand somewhat. You can't just say I'm a stay-at-home dad or a stay-at-home mum, you're a stay-at-home parent, I'm the kids' father and I'm out doing the same things a woman would do. But there seems to be this world of 90-95% mums who are there, it's all mums isn't it? You sprinkle a few guys in and it's like, it's a stay-at-home dad, oh my God, it's a stay-at-home dad.

He follows up describing an almost shock to the system when he sees another SAHD out and about. He describes seeing a dad in a store and states, "I'm the token stay-at-home dad in this store today! You've got to join our club; it's a high barrier to entry."

I ask Steven what he thinks about the portrayal of SAHDs in current pop culture and if he judges or feels judged based on these representations.

I do think that is what other people are doing [judging] to us. The only difference I have there is from my recollection I have seen on occasions and the one time at the park, I remember some guy was there and he didn't talk at first. I remember judging him thinking, dude you know you can't even come up and say 'hey, how are you going?' You know how men have that kind of bravado like they won't say anything at first, kind of like they are sussing you out like they're too cool. I've gone beyond that anyway, but I've noticed that ego where men are like that. But when you've got kids and you're a stay-at-home dad; that shit's out the window. You should see another dude and be like, man I totally know where you're coming from. I've found in my experience, I felt kind of empathetic when I've seen guys in that position... like I know how you feel dude, I know

what it's like and in that car as you're driving here, there might have been crazy shit going on...like in the minivan with the TV on. I think my last recollection was seeing a guy somewhere and I had this feeling of like...oh man...I didn't say anything...but kind of like respect man, I know what you're going through.

I am aware of the empathetic tone to Steven's voice as he describes this incident. It is clear, he means what he says. I say, "I think you are a very empathetic person." Steven responds with a laugh, almost as if he is embarrassed, "It isn't like I'm going to say, 'Hey, I'm a stay-at-home dad too, let's shop together.' I'm not going to do that."

Our waiter breaks into the conversation and asks us if we need anything else. We decline. Steven takes the time to pause, becoming more serious and refocuses on the empathic nature of his personality.

I definitely see that. Probably for me, what I've gone through, the tough times of being a stay-at-home dad, I don't forget it. So when I see someone else doing it, I think I'm an empathetic person and I've found myself sending out good vibes...I hope you're doing alright man because I know what you are going through; and I do, I try to send out some good vibes. I won't meet the guy. I won't talk to the guy, but I know he's out there with his kids and I think in this day and age there aren't as many stay-at-home dads as I thought there would be. Sometimes I hear people say it, but I don't see a lot around me ever. So at first I think I'm a bit shocked and I'm like a stay-at-home dad. I have a laugh and say I'm the stay-at-home dad in this store today. I have actually thought that, then I'm like Steven, don't be a big pussy; don't be a bitch to him. I remember one time I was watching a guy and thinking, I could tell he was struggling with his kids... and I was thinking to myself, 'Mate, it will be cool. I've been down that road'...how many years have I been doing it now?

I respond with a laugh and state, "A long time." Steven chuckles and takes another sip of his drink pondering his history within the role. He becomes more introspective.

Yeah, it's a blessing but there are times when I've sat at the park almost close to tears like what is going on, you know? I have. Now I must admit I'm really in control of it. I'm really handling it. I think that is probably why I'm more chill now because I feel like I'm ok with it. So I'm not going to say oh they're doing great I bet their life is rosy and I'm struggling. I get back in there and I have the second baby coming along and that was the one that tipped me over the edge. But now I'm like, I'm cool, and obviously I don't see that many stay-at-home dads anyway. I can't remember the last time I did. I just remember the place but that story I just told you I do remember seeing a guy and just being like, 'Good for you.' When you see a man struggling or trying to do his things, I

don't know what the word is, maybe multitasking...when I see a man multitasking with his kids, because you know he is a stay-at-home dad...I'm like respect to you man. Because men aren't built, I don't think, to multitask; we kind of focus on one thing. I've found that the times when I'm multitasking is when I'm trying to do my business and I've got all different programs I'm talking to, and different countries...what do I tell him and I've got to remember to do this, this and the other. But when I'm with the kids primarily I'm trying to multitask and I'm like...tough...I suppose I finish it now when I'm so tired mentally and I think to myself when I see someone over that time, I see them and remember thinking, fair enough man, fair enough. Because you see a woman and I almost sense that you know, it does almost sound sexist, but I'm kind of like you're a woman, you do this well. This is something that you are honestly programmed to do, with or without the kids, you multitask and you keep a hundred things in your brain. Even if it is the right thing or the wrong thing, you still do it because that's what women do. Mary does it all the time. But a man, you're not really built to do that. So when I do see it, I do feel kind of empathy, like good for you man.

There is no doubt that societal norms and expectations influence Steven. He describes positive feedback from those who are older than him but feels judged by his generation, especially the mothers that he sees when he is out with the children. I relate to what he has expressed and understand the difficulty of being the only man in rooms full of women and children. It is isolating and impacts how Steven structures his days and spends time with his children.

### **Bullying Effects**

Our conversations are circular, weaving in and out of the past, present, and future. Steven and I have developed a strong sense of understanding and he appears very comfortable with me. It is evident with each circular evolution we are digging deeper and deeper. Once again, we revisit the bullying effects of his childhood.

I think to myself, like today my daughter had her birthday party... I went to the school and did a parent day and was reading a book to the kids. I read an English book and we had a little movie, it's called *The Gruffalo*. It is a really sweet story about a Gruffalo that lives in the woods and this little mouse that...anyway the point of the story there is one of those little girls that comes up and she is kind of boisterous and very domineering and I watched this and I wonder to myself...what is going on with your home life that makes a child a certain way. Because a lot of times you find the way kids are is a reflection of the way that they are being taught at home and I know with Mia, we see things with Mia with

stuff and she passes it on in conversation when she is in school and stuff. So I'm sure that a lot of parents say ok, well if Mia says this then that is what they are saying or that is what they are like or what they believe at home. This one little girl, she is bright as day and I was watching her with Mia...and the weird thing is I went to a party on Friday and this girl was there as well and she is like intense, domineering, pushing the other girls out of the way saying I want to go next. She did the same thing with the other kids, and I find myself wondering what is your home life like that you find yourself now at the age of six or whatever and you are in this way. I remember thinking the crazy thing...I remember being that age and I remember my parents reaction to children at that age with that sort of attitude and personality and the ironic thing was my mum would say, 'Oh little Johnny down the street, I'm not sure if I want you to hang out with him too much.' It turns out my parents were never wrong. A kid who showed signs like this at that certain age, I look back at this and all these kids later on they've all had issues. And that is something that already now I'm thinking. She is six years old and I'm saying, 'Babe, with all due respect, I've got nothing against the girl but I don't want Mia to be around that girl.' If I felt bad saying that, I don't want her to have to go through the ordeals of like...for example, if she were a friend with this little girl, she'd be the submissive one. This girl would be like, 'let's do this, let's try this, and let's go there.' I've met her family and I've met her mom and her dad and I'm kind of like to a certain extent I'm like what is it about those two...and we know what it is and we talk about it. And now she's at an age, already at six years old where I'm starting to say to Mary that I don't want her really to be alone and build up a friendship with that person. I felt kind of bad saying it, but better to say it and be honest that you don't want your child to be around certain people. It is weird how you see kids; they are so much a reflection of what goes on in their house. I was doing the piñata today and I was standing over the balcony with the piñata swinging. It was so much fun and I was watching them and thinking isn't it crazy...because you're up high and looking down at their different personalities and the way they are all reacting, these little girls. There's the one who is boisterous, there is the one who is sitting back, there's the two that are trying to figure out who is going to go first. The youngest one is so blown away that she's in this drop off party, she's like the other girls to see how she should act. It was crazy interesting actually. The other thing I thought is, I wonder how many of these girls will end up being friends when they are older, our age you know. It's crazy, you see at this young age how little personalities are being formed. I think with your own daughter and your own son, you think whom do I want my children to be around? At the end of the day, all you've got to do is to trust what your gut tells you, I'm a big believer in that. You cannot get away from the fact that every time you see a child act a certain way, it is only a reflection of the parents. A child at a young age, as far as I'm concerned, eventually they start getting involved for themselves and they learn for themselves, but at the age our kids are every one of those is a mirror image and a reflection of a relationship between the man or the woman, if you're lucky because sometimes you find these people that sadly are divorced or something. There is one kid now whose parents are and I already see a difference in her as a child and I feel so sorry for her. You cannot get away from the fact that everything our kids do...they are learning to be independent people but it is almost like baking a cake, the ingredients are put in there by the parents. How it turns out over time relies on the child and their social interactions but the funny thing is you create this child and they are all reflection of the

parents. When you see a kid act a certain way, I immediately think I wonder what their parental situation is like. Very much so, because of my past I'm at the point where I'm very open especially in America, I love meeting new people. I'm always friendly but I cannot get away from the fact that I'm judging all the time when I meet people that Mia is around and thinking ok, I need to know that you're going to be cool. If I see any signs that they're not cool...like that one girl, for example, I said already to Mary I'm not...I don't want to be the sort of parent who says 'You will not see this person!' But I hope...because at a certain level kids need to learn for themselves but at a young age you need to help guide your kids and say you don't need to be going down this path because I don't see it being beneficial for you right now.

Steven focuses on his oldest daughter who is in first grade. He hopes that the parenting that he has done will profoundly impact her decision making to be around good people.

I want Mia to feel, and I think she does just to be around cool people. I want to be like all we need is love man, just be around good people. Be good energy. If someone is cool, I love meeting cool people who have cool kids. That's how it should be, keep it simple. Of course we've got ups and downs, we have good days and bad days, we all learn from our mistakes but if you meet someone who right from the start you're like they've got issues- I feel for them and feel sorry for them but I'm not a drama queen, I don't like drama, and I don't want my kids around drama. I won't have it. I just won't have it.

It's all about energy level I think, if you put your kids in that position around bad energy, with people that have too much going on, you're not helping them. You're not being a good parent. Kids don't need to be tested or tried at a young age. They need to be shown a path with all good people on the path, people that can help them. There will be days that they meet someone who is not so cool. But as a parent while your children are young, I think you need to say don't go here, do go here, meet this person. That is why as parents we want our children...we want to hang out with good people ourselves. We are just simple people; we've always been that way. We've always gravitated toward great people who are like us...and in turn now being parents, and your children gravitate toward their children and get the sense of being around good people. Because heaven forbid...but God knows when they get into school and they are put in that mix where there are no choices really, you are around all different sorts of people. When I hated school as a kid with all the problems that I had, I was in this sheltered place until I went to school and when I went to school it's like you're in the mix, everyone is in there. You sort of find out is your kids upbringing strong enough where will they go with the right people, or will they get sucked up with the bad people? I don't want Mia to ever get sucked in; I want her to be around the good people with the good people. Then life can be what you want it to be.

I can hear the concern in Steven's voice. He has mentioned in past conversations that he has researched the possibility of homeschooling his children and now I understand why. His



deep love for his children and his desire for them to be happy, above all else, is a top, if not the highest priority in his life. He recalls how his life began to fall apart when he was introduced to others in his hometown, the genesis of this introduction being his placement in public school. Steven worries about his children making the right choices and he works hard, on a daily basis, to instill positive values and surround them with the most positive and joyful people he knows. He hopes this will set the tone for their future lives.

### **Final Thoughts**

Our conversations are coming to an end. We have developed a strong rapport and our stories intertwine in many ways. I say to Steven without much forethought, “You know other people, they just don’t get it. They don’t understand the SAHD.” Steven takes the thought and runs with it as he crosses the finish line.

They don’t. One day, here’s what I think, our daughters...in the past your kids will go and you’ll give them advice as a man where as a man you work and you’re a father. We are going to be able to give our kids advice from both sides of the spectrum. On one hand, of course, we are men, we do our man thing and you can’t dispute that, but at the same time we’ve got this experience that hardly any other men have got of being the paternal, effeminate side of things. Which I don’t think is effeminate. I think it is a good thing, it’s a good thing to have; you’ve got both ends of the spectrum. You’ll find that all this is going to come to be of great value and benefit further down the road. It isn’t all it’s about right now. It is what you can bring to your kids and what you can give them further down the road when they need it. And you think in the past how many times have guys probably just said, ‘you do this, and this, and this, and this’ and they give that kind of like masculine advice. We can give advice from both ends of the spectrum to our children further down the road in many years time when they need it. I think they’ll be like you know what, we’ll be looked at then and say people who were stay-at-home dads will have a very, very different perspective on things. We’ll be able to give a very, very broad spectrum of advice and really relevant advice to our children. In a world that is going to be very, very different when they are teenagers and done growing up. None of this has affected who we are as men. I genuinely feel, and I never used to think this at the start, I thought I was doing this because I had to do it. I think this has made...without a doubt I know...this has made us like even better. I feel it makes you a Superman. You’re coming at it with loads more string to your bow. These things that we’ve been through, this experience, at the start was very tough, very challenging because you come at it from a male point of view like I can’t comprehend it, I can’t get my head around it because I’m a man and I don’t know how to do this. Once you’ve got used to it and you deal, you’re like fuck it, you know? I can do this as well; I can do the man thing, the parent thing, and

the stay-at-home dad thing. All of it is a benefit, all of it helps you, and all of it is going to be of use to you when your kid is coming to you for advice. I think it will be nothing but beneficial for us, it really will.

At first I didn't think that, but I know that now. I'm quite comfortable with... I'm more than comfortable with who I am. I've noticed in my life at times I've thought, do I really want to do this and I've felt uncomfortable. They've been the times that I've realized and looked and thought thank God that I did them. Thank God, you know. This is one of them. There are the times that I've travelled, and when I met Mary, when I moved to America, when I did all these millions of things in my past and no one else is doing them. This is the only thing in our life, we seem to be the sort of guys who do these things and no one else is doing them. I've done that in my life and all my mates went to college and I was like no I'm going to go out and do something that I want to do. I went and worked as a bartender in a divorcees club and all these crazy, shitty jobs I had. I didn't know why but I just did them. I did new stuff. All the stuff that I've done has led me to become a different person, the person that I want to be. I think you really get benefit and change as a person when you get put in uncomfortable positions. If you can stick out those uncomfortable positions and say you know what I'll keep going with it, I'll keep doing it because it is going to take me someplace better than if I just followed the norm. I think people in life are either sheep or a wolf. I think you and I, even though it might look like we are sheep, in sheep's clothing because we are stay-at-home dads; that's not the case. We are doing shit that a lot of men wouldn't have the fucking balls to do. They wouldn't have the balls to do that. They'd say stay-at-home dad, I ain't doing that because they are too ignorant to even understand what it actually means. What it means is you're being given the honor of raising your children on your own. Your wife is still there, but she is at work. So when it comes down to it, it is you and your kids, there's no one else to hold your hand. It is you and how you are as a person, how you are as a man raising your kids. I think to myself, there is no greater honor than saying this is your fucking shift mate, you do it. It's up to you. Whether they become good kids or bad kids, it's on your fucking shoulders. You won't have someone holding your hand; it's up to you.

The passion in Steven's voice has filled the room. His words feel prophetic as he predicts the effects upon his children of his time as a SAHD. I smile. I feel the goosebumps on my body.

It is like I just participated in one of the greatest pregame speeches by Vince Lombardi. I am filled with the dichotomy of emotions, sadness and happiness, as I shut off the recorder; sadness because our time is over and happiness that there are dads like Steven raising children.

## **Postlude**

Steven mentions the song 'Lucky Man' (Ashcroft, 1997) many times in our dialogues because that is how he feels. Here are the lyrics that resonate so much with him.

*Lucky Man*

Happiness, more or less  
It's just a change in me  
Something in my liberty

Happiness, coming and going  
I watch you look at me  
Watch my fever growing  
I know just where I am

But how many corners do I have to turn?  
How many times do I have to learn  
All the love I have is in my mind?

I'm a lucky man  
With fire in my hands

Happiness, something in my own place  
I'm stood here naked  
Smiling, I feel no disgrace  
With who I am

Happiness, coming and going  
I watch you look at me  
Watch my fever growing  
I know just who I am

And how many corners do I have to turn?  
How many times do I have to learn  
All the love I have is in my mind?  
I hope you understand

Happiness, more or less  
It's just a change in me  
Something in my liberty

Happiness, coming and going  
I watch you look at me  
Watch my fever growing

I know  
Gotta love that'll never die  
I gotta love that'll never die

I'm a lucky man (Ashcroft, 1997, track 9)

## PART TWO: ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to describe and thereby better understand the lived experience of SAHDs and how they make meaning within the role. You have met Steven and read his story; now it is time to explore his narrative which is dissected holistically (Lieblich et al., 1998) and threaded by the themes that have manifested throughout his life. By exploring his narrative, I uncovered three overarching narratives that may help in the understanding of his lived experience as a SAHD.

### **Steven is an Explorer/Wanderer**

Just as he did as a child, Steven looked to explore the world. He has a confidence within himself, that is not the least bit arrogant, and a strong faith that everything will work out positively. He left the village of his youth as a young man to explore new avenues. He grew out his hair, his lion's mane, and continued to work out, becoming physically bigger and more defined. He lived in places from Greece to Australia to the Philippines. He was poor and typically bartended for income. He was unafraid to do something unknown and different; therefore, as his age group went to the University, he received an education elsewhere, travelling the world and meeting people. He was enlightened by their stories. His willingness to do something against the grain such as travel, marry a woman from another country, come to the United States of America, start businesses, and ultimately take on the role of SAHD has provided Steven with opportunities for the life and happiness he had hoped for as a child.

After leaving the village Steven's world opened up. He began to view the world differently. He discovered and developed relationships with others who were similar to him. Although he was a traveler, a true outsider, he felt connected to the people he met and finally started to feel at home with himself. The growth and development during this time of his life cemented him in his manhood. He met his future wife after random events, that later did not seem so random, brought them together. From the moment he saw her, he turned to his brother, who often accompanied him on his travels, and said, "I will marry her someday." Their budding relationship blossomed. Soon after, they were married and decided to live in the United States of America which brought another set of challenges for Steven. Once again, being different, a role that he was becoming accustomed to, made it difficult to find work and he struggled through odd jobs while his wife's burgeoning career began to flourish. Through this period Steven worked in construction, real estate, and fitness. He fed his creative personality by journaling his thoughts, dabbling in writing screenplays. The makeup of their careers gave him more time to take care of the household division of labor and the onset of children only announced his role within the home as they decided to have him take on the role of SAHD. Steven and Mary were strongly influenced by the day-to-day interaction of their mothers and recognized their desire to give their children the chance to develop in the daily environment within the home versus daycare. Steven agreed to this SAHD arrangement without second thought believing things happen for reasons; however, the transition into the role was hindered by his desire to start a business within the technology field. He found it very difficult to turn off the professional role and become stay-at-home daddy.

Today Steven is a wanderer who has found his place. He lives in a modest suburban home with his wife and children in a neighborhood filled with kids. The yard, or garden, as

Steven calls it, is manicured but not overly pristine. His backyard has a beautiful deck where he and Mary like to spend summer evenings over a bottle of wine. His house is full of toys, but nothing is really out of place. It is clean and comfortable. The walls are lined with family photos of memories they have created throughout the years, some of the most poignant being when he was a little boy before the bullying began. This home is where Steven spends most of his time and over the course of the past seven years Steven has learned to separate the roles of professional and stay-at-home dad within its boundaries. Currently Steven is a full time SAHD who works in the evenings. Not too long ago, their nanny moved to be closer to her own 20-something daughter. Within seven years he has become a father to four children and has seen his relationship with his wife grow amidst the natural ups and downs that time and children bring. When his wife is home, he works on his tech business and is having some success at it develops into something more sustaining and substantial.

As an explorer, Steven is naturally very social and has developed a strong network of close friends for his family who ground him. He believes that it is the utmost importance to surround his children with good people who have good children. He wants his kids to understand that they are loved and that they should not feel any hint of the despair that he felt as a child. Steven mentioned in our interviews that he is worried that his children may be bullied in the future. It is a legitimate concern and he has had a few powerful discussions with them already, one which was outlined in his narrative. He often wonders if he is coming on too strong, and Mary has questioned his intention, but he feels like he has been age appropriate with them in the dialogue. He and his wife are active in their children's school and he has volunteered to help on a few occasions. Steven recognizes the social isolation of an in-home business coupled with the SAHD role and believes it is important to break out of the solitude. He and his wife maintain a

busy calendar that is typically booked on most weekends. Steven also maintains a personal training business in which he sees clients a few times a week, usually after Mary returns home from work on weeknights or Saturday mornings. This gives him social and physical outlets which are important to his mental health and overall well being. He also plays soccer on a local team every weekend which gives him the connection to the sport he loved growing up and a band of brothers with similar interests.

I have witnessed the interaction with Steven, his wife, and children over the course of our time together. He is typically affectionate with Mary. He kisses and hugs her when they meet. He is hands on with his kids. He lets them climb on him and hug him. I have witnessed him pushing one child in a stroller as the others hang on his back. Unlike his father, he is overt in his praise yet will discipline when needed. He is not passive with them. He wants them to know that they are loved. He wants them to be happy. He strives to make them smile and laugh. This is important to him.

Steven's parents try to visit at least once a year and he attempts to do the same. When he returns home to England he is welcomed back by his family. He enjoys the beauty of his home village and lets his children run free just as he did as child. Steven and Mary also take time to visit her family consisting of her parents and her brother throughout the year. Steven enjoys these visits.

The explorer in Steven has settled and he envisions himself growing old with Mary in his community. I imagine them on a back porch, in a neighborhood close to their children, sipping a glass of wine and reminiscing on this time in their lives together. Steven is simple in his goals, and wants to be fulfilled, but more importantly he desires that his children will be happy. He can

easily visualize sitting down with his children recalling stories of the past and mentions this often. Of course, he will be smiling and laughing.

Steven once told me that his seven year old daughter loves lions. So much so, that all she wanted for Christmas was a plush stuffed lion. After some contemplation, I realized why she loves lions; it is because Steven is a protector. His childhood and young adulthood ensured it. He is his family's protector, a true lion, the leader of the pack, king of the wild, who left home, found himself, and fell in love. He is a lion who has been domesticated for the sake of his family. He sees the benefits of his decision. He convinces himself of this decision amidst his ambivalence. His childhood wounds are healing and his roar has softened. He doesn't have to fight anymore. He is a dad, a good dad, whose eyes always filled with tears as he wished for his children to be happy in their future lives.

### **Steven Was Bullied**

The bullying that Steven received as a young boy shaped how he makes meaning in his present life and impacts every aspect of his daily routine. During our interviews we explored this meaning, which was presented within the dichotomy of the serene physical landscape versus its disruptive social environment. Steven spoke fondly of this physical landscape in which he was raised, often describing its picturesque beauty as something one would see on the big screen, comparing it to *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*. His parents moved to this charming countryside manor for work and thought it an ideal setting to start a family. Shortly after the move, Steven was born. The ability to run free, explore the land, play in the rivers and tranquil countryside nurtured Steven's inquisitive personality and I believe later fed his desire to explore the world on his own.



Steven was raised within the bounds of a strong parental foundation, something he wanted to duplicate when he was older. He was nurtured by his mother throughout his childhood and he wanted and strived to please his dad. His mom stayed at home as the primary caregiver while his dad worked. He described his dad as a man of few words who is loyal and honest; therefore, Steven did not get much overt praise, which he desired, from his dad, but knew that he cared for him and would stand up for him as was demonstrated in his narrative. Steven was, and continues to be, very close to his brother and has his name tattooed on his leg. They were treated almost as twins growing up with ten months separating their births. I recall a picture that Steven has on display at his house; it is of Steven and his brother, almost indistinguishable, in a diner with his dad and uncle; everyone is laughing, a word Steven uses often to describe happiness, with the biggest smiles. They look like they are having great fun and it appears to be exactly as Steven described his early childhood, “pure happiness”, in a childhood where Steven felt loved within his family unit.

Steven spoke of the innocence of his early childhood, almost a sheltered time, with his brother and parents, but something shifted, and the innocence was lost, when he started public school; a cloud began to hover over him and he began to realize that he was an outsider, different than those who attended school with him. Beginning at age eight he began to realize he was not going to fit in and felt a lack of belonging and acceptance from his peers. There were violent threats, constant teasing, and fights. Despite the bullying from his male peers, he received plenty of attention from the young ladies within the village but wasn't too overly interested in their advances, partly because of the potential consequences of the other male suitors in the village. He turned his focus to soccer and idolized the soccer greats he watched on television, dreamed of being a professional footballer, and began to play in his neighborhood. He was successful and

found the success was a double edged sword because it drew attention to his dissimilarity; however, it gave him a place to fit among those who disliked him. Steven learned to make quick judgments regarding the character of an individual and then promptly decide if he would let them into his life. Steven took on the role of family protector, a lion, at this point in his young life, primarily to his brother; a role that transferred and continues to define him as a SAHD. He was his brother's keeper and made sure he was safe even at his own expense. Throughout our interviews, whenever Steven mentioned this point in his life I could feel an intense pain that was deep inside. The stark contrast of description and emotion regarding the happiness within the picturesque beauty of the village and warm household versus the bitterness and threat of the villagers was hard to process as the listener. I do not think I can overstress the scene when Steven described the villagers, his peaceful demeanor would become morose, and the content and description of his dialogue changed; his words harsher and more poignant. He described the villagers as "inbred fucking people." I could feel his hatred for them. He stated, "It [the bullying] reshaped my life. It is something that makes my blood run cold and I get so angry about it." He continued, "It shaped how I am underneath. I'll never be able to shake what I went through as a kid and the things that emotionally scarred me." As an adolescent Steven began to apply defense mechanisms to combat his feelings. He suppressed and changed parts of his personality to avoid who he really was. He also channeled his anger through sublimation, meaning he took the hatred he felt and applied that negative energy into something positive, weight lifting. This served a few purposes: a bigger and stronger physique and the increased ability to defend himself, if needed. This time in his life, as a youth, more than any other, shaped who he is today and manifests in his roles as a fitness trainer and a SAHD.

I found it telling that during our interviews Steven was very engaged in our dialogue but would often pause to look around the restaurant, as if he was assessing the scene. I'm not sure if he is aware of this or not. It felt that years of suppression were creeping into his present consciousness. As I have mentioned, he is a handsome man, who is full of positive energy. He is also charming and very friendly, but underneath the outward charisma continues to be anger and fear from his past which influences the present and was annunciated in his narrative, especially within a conversation with his children. He sat down with them and described the meaning of a bully. He told them that a bully is "the most frightened, scared person" and that they should never think the bully is "someone who is on top of the world."

His children went to Mary later that day and told her that daddy said the bully is the most scared person at school. Mary later confronted Steven and asked him what he said. He told her that he described a bully as the most frightened individual at the school. At that point, he realized that his past was living in the present with his children and that he may need to rethink his motives; however, he didn't feel he was being irresponsible. Steven admits to being overprotective and knows his history creeps out of his subconscious, but there are times when he may not be aware of it. For instance, Steven discussed the possibility of homeschooling and asked my opinion. He wasn't sure how it would affect his children. He never expressed why he was exploring the option, but it seemed that the main reason was to avoid the possibility of social harassment.

In a poignant, but brief, moment during one of our interviews Steven mentioned the story, *The Gruffalo*, by Julia Donaldson (1999). In fact, he volunteered at his daughter's school and read it to her class. I was not familiar with the story, so I looked it up. I have now read it many times. In the story, the protagonist, a little mouse, goes for a walk in the woods. On his

journey he encounters a fox, an owl, and a snake who want to eat him as a delicious meal. The fox, first, tries to entice the mouse into his “underground house” but the clever little mouse responds swiftly describing, in detail, a menacing gruffalo, his lunch date, whose favorite food is “roasted fox.” Hearing these words, the intimidated fox immediately vanishes into the forest. Next, the mouse meets an owl who asks him up for tea in his “treetop house.” The mouse, once again, thinks quickly and describes his lunch date with the terrible creature, the gruffalo, whose favorite food is “owl ice cream.” The terrified owl quickly flies away. Finally, the little protagonist mouse meets a snake who tempts him with a feast in his “log pile house.” The mouse cleverly describes his friend who he is meeting for a feast, the evil gruffalo, whose favorite food is “scrambled snake.” The snake does not want to be scrambled and slithers into the deep forest. The mouse boastfully thinks to himself, “Don’t they know that there is no such thing as a gruffalo.” Enjoying his ingenuity, the mouse continues to walk through the forest when he is amazed by the sight of a real gruffalo who says his favorite food is mouse on a slice of bread. But the mouse, in his adeptness, reports to the gruffalo that he is the “scariest creature in the deep dark wood.” He continues, “Just walk behind me and you will see, everyone is afraid of me.” The gruffalo laughingly agrees. First, they find the snake, and mouse greets him with a hello. Immediately the snake sees the gruffalo and slithers and hides. Next, they discover the owl and mouse greets him with a salutation. Once again, the owl sees the gruffalo and flies off into the sky. Finally, they stumble upon fox. Mouse addresses him with hello and the fox instantly leaves after seeing gruffalo. The mouse turns to gruffalo and says, “Now you see, everyone is afraid of me. But now my tummy is starting to rumble and my favorite food is...gruffalo crumble.” Hearing these words, the gruffalo has no choice but to flee and the witty little mouse continues his walk and sits down with a nut for his glorious feast.

*The Gruffalo*, is written in different layers. I have pondered what speaks to Steven within the story. I believe he is drawn to the clever little mouse's intellect, wit, and creativity to outsmart his personal bullies. I often wonder if this is something Steven wished he had done as a young man. Did he view his bullies as a Gruffalo? Was he unable to outsmart them, therefore, succumbing to brute physicality to deal with them? Did he create an image in his mind of what they were, when in reality they were something different; Freud called it splitting, meaning selectively focusing on the part of an individual or community to fit the need state of the individual, Steven? And, what is he attempting to teach his children through this book? Is he focusing more on the character of the bully, the gruffalo, therefore giving it power and making the individual the victim; or is he exploring the character of the mouse, focusing on individual autonomy and freedom to control one's own destiny, not being reactive, but a proactive creator of one's present moment? It is unclear; however, I do know that Steven didn't want to feel different, he didn't want to fight back, but he felt as if he had no choice, and repressed much of his anger to get through the days that led to years. He counted these days until the clouds broke, revealing sunshine to a new path; then he would leave and life would start anew. He concluded, "I couldn't really be who I wanted to be unless I got to the age where I could move away and leave that shit behind." However, as his oldest child edges closer to her eighth birthday, his transference of a world turned upside down continues to haunt the various layers of his psyche extending into his lived experience as a SAHD, a role which could provide an avenue for his demons to play out on his children through his repression, projection, and overprotection; or it could provide the space for personal closure and freedom for his children.

## **Steven is Ambivalent**

Steven's ambivalence toward his role as a SAHD is another theme that emerged throughout our interviews. I first noticed it when he outlined the familial division of labor. There seemed to be a desire to hold onto the masculinity and traditional roles of his youth. Although, his wife works outside of the home, within it are very traditional roles such as Mary does the shopping, cooking, and vast majority of cleaning. Furthermore, to the casual reader, it may appear that Steven is very content in his role as a SAHD. He spoke with passion and intensity which could lure in the reader and promote an empathic response. In person, he is very charismatic and I often felt I was getting a pregame speech by Vince Lombardi; however, after much contemplation, it appears that Steven may have been giving himself that motivational speech, as if he was trying to convince himself that he was satisfied within the role. I believe I often served as a sounding board and may have unconsciously put on my therapeutic hat to elicit more of his true feelings. Regardless of the intent of his ambivalence, there is no doubt that Steven is passionate about what he does as a dad and that he puts his heart and soul into his time with his children.

I have chosen three key themes, out of many, that highlight Steven's ambivalence that are weaved throughout his narrative. Furthermore, I annunciate on their meaning, essentially describing what it is that we learn from each theme.

### *Societal Norms Influenced His Ambivalence*

As stated, Steven often reflected on the physical beauty of the landscape of his home as a child; however, at times he expressed the unstable social environment that also existed. Where he grew up dads worked and the only reason a dad would be home is if he lost his job. It was not a badge of honor to be in the home during a working day. In fact, it would have been viewed as a

sign of weakness. Therefore, today, in his present world the traditional roles he learned as a child were juxtaposed against a more modern contemporary American setting where he struggled to become the breadwinner. He reflected on this in one of many similar statements throughout our interviews.

But as it stands now, which is quite common with people that I do know, my wife or women have a lot more influential jobs now with a lot more benefits and a lot better standing than I do, certainly than I had in England. Whereas when we were kids you never ever heard of a stay-at-home dad. So, that's how it is right now. I'd also say as well, it's funny because it's not something that's ever bothered me. I've not felt any stigma or any thought of discomfort with it.

Steven then stated,

From the very, very start I remember it is more to do with the lack of satisfaction of having come from another country trying to start a new life. There is a lot of pressure a lot of stress trying to start a whole new life in a brand new country and that and have your wife be the breadwinner that as a man, initially was a shock.

This shock that he described existed before children and was due to the societal norms he learned as a young child in England.

Steven spoke often of his current interactions with the public and its affect on his world as a SAHD. His desire to be successful as a breadwinner was often juxtaposed with the reality of his situation as it played out beyond the confines of his own home. On one occasion he outlined reactions from the others with the juxtaposition of ambivalence italicized for emphasis.

You know it's a blessing and I'm a stay at home parent and everyone is like, ah, I wish I could do that. I'm like oh yea, it's cool, *but* have you tried to start a business at the same time? Have you tried to be a man? You know be the traditional man at the same time as you're trying to be the traditional mother but in a male form. It's fucking hard you know? It is! It is something that as a man, even though you want to go into it, it's not a balance.

Moments like these throughout our interviews serve as a glimpse into the peak of Steven's frustration and anger driven by the longing to be a traditional man who in reality has taken on the traditional mother role.

On another occasion Steven began convincing me and himself of what works and matters within his life. He began, "It matters what works, and what works is what we've got and it's a brilliant thing. It had its challenges at the start but they were never challenges that I was confused by." But then he twists the conversation after taking a pause to really process what he was thinking. He focused on the frustration pertaining to the lack of power and control that he once had as a young man, traveling, without any borders or confines. Now he is boarded in the boundaries of the suburbs, frequenting parks instead of bars, with a diaper bag slung around the neck. He stated,

I get why I'm frustrated, I get why I'm kind of...I just always wanted like the power, I always wanted to have control...but when you get put in this position I think immediately the control is like this ironic test. The control is taken away from you and you're thrown into this completely unique situation that you have to, as a man, adapt to. I think men can adapt to many things but this is something that when you are going out to the park with your diaper bag and your push chair and everyone there is a woman and you're the only dude, that is something that no matter how many times you do it, it always feels a little bit funny.

Therefore, every time he visits a park he is reminded of his inability to fulfill the role he craves.

...then reality hits and you're like, now you're a stay-at-home dad now fucking deal, now get on. Get it on and do what you've got to do. And let your qualities as a man come out and become a real stay at home dad, not just a babysitter but a stay at home dad. As we've gone through it we've gone through these ups and downs and different things we've experienced and days where we are like close to tears, you feel kind of isolated, you feel you don't fit in, because it's all women and you're the only dude.

Then, once again, Steven is transitioned by a moment of positivity with the ambivalence continuing without a resolution. But this time it's almost an acceptance of the reality. He has wrestled to overcome his desire to be the breadwinner and is opening up to the embracing of the role of SAHD.

Times have changed and I was willing to change with them and say I'll make the most of this; I'll make the best of this. Lo and behold being a stay-at-home dad has been and



always will be one of the biggest I think honors that a man can have. If he realizes that, if he doesn't start saying I should go out and be the breadwinner. You give me the option of being the breadwinner or raising children in the house when you're also trying to build a business, there is no comparison. As far as I'm concerned, that there is the fucking hard one, raising children at home that, if you're blessed to be given that opportunity, are you man enough to take it? Or will you crumble and be like, oh my wife has to do that. Fucking man up and say I've been blessed, here I go.

Maybe Steven has finally walked the talk and accepted it is a "brilliant thing, it's a blessing."

### *Ambivalence of a Stay-at-Home Role Existed Before Children*

After moving to the United States Steven looked for work but found it difficult to find a good job that would make enough money and provide benefits to support a family. Instead of pursuing work outside of the home, he decided to form his own businesses working construction and then technology. His desire to fulfill the traditional breadwinning role that he witnessed as a child did not materialize as Amy held a steady job with good pay providing the "structure and foundation" for the family; therefore, he was in the home attempting to build various businesses while his wife was out, maintaining a stable income. He struggled with this unfulfilled role and believes this pattern set the cornerstone for him to take on the parental duties of SAHD. Steven stated, "There was never that sense of oh my God, how are we going to handle this?" Steven and Amy had done "everything together" and had spent "many years in this predicament" before children. He continued, "I feel we evolved into pretty easily into it. I kind of expected it at some point."

At one point during our interviews Steven clarified this ambivalence by talking about predestiny and change.

The pattern was set then. And then I went through a stage where I did work and I ended up having a construction company and I started business and what have you. But then when it came down to we were having children, it just sort of happened that her job had better benefits. At the time I was in a position where my job was working from home, my business was on the Internet, so it was kind of being at home. So, therefore it was almost predestined at that level but that is the place we were at. So initially going into it, it was

very much a case of this is the mold we've got, this is the way it's going to be. This is how we're going to work having children. We didn't ever think at this stage how do we change it to do the traditional thing where, or what would be deemed traditional where my wife would be at home and I would be out working. It just so happened that our setup was like that, so really it was predetermined, that is how it was.

He then continued annunciating the hope and possibility of change,

I just have to say that we won't ever change it because the way things are going, there would be a point where if she were to quit and probably explore that where she would come home and I would be working from home doing what would be deemed the breadwinner.

In another moment during our interviews Steven continued to announce his desire for change. He stated, "I know it could change..." and then he crystallized his desire by stating, "that it's going to change, so because of that we are at a point where we feel ourselves blessed."

#### *Ambivalence is Amplified by Guilt*

Steven stated, "There's no doubt we [SAHDS] are lucky." He immediately followed this feeling of elation with, "I feel guilty as well." He talked about this guilt often and as he did I empathetically felt it, as it dominates much of my SAHD life. On another occasion Steven stated, "Other days where everything works and it's like this is awesome. You feel guilty because your wife is at work and she wants to be at home and you should be the one working." In those moments of bliss, which are often few and far between, it seemed like he couldn't truly enjoy them because of the dark cloud of guilt hovering over the experience. And finally, in a very emotional moment during our interviews he stated, "It is a blessing but there are times when I've sat at the park almost close to tears like what the fuck is going on, you know." Often, I believe, it is this guilt that drives the desire of Steven, and possibly other SAHDs, to become a breadwinner.

## **Conclusion**

Steven is an explorer who has wandered through various landscapes and settings throughout his life beginning the day he left his home village after years of struggle which included being bullied. His wanderings led to a chance encounter where he met a girl who changed his life. He soon married her, had children, and took on the role of SAHD. Steven demonstrates ambivalence to this role; however, he thrives within it. He understands the importance of setting a positive and loving environment for his children. He does everything in his power to provide them with comfort and safety, something that was often lacking in his childhood. His ambivalence to the role often stems from his confliction with starting a business and performing at a high level as a SAHD, yet he has found a way to do it. Over the course of his life Steven has overcome adversity, often feeling different than those around him, yet he has been successful and now his wandering soul seems to have finally found peace and a place to rest in suburban America with his wife and children.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SCOTT  
PART ONE: HIS STORY

**Prelude, The Vision**

*“I do pride myself on being able to do it without always needing the feminine perspective.”*

After a few meetings, in a very candid moment, Scott recounts a retreat to Sedona, Arizona. He leans forward in his booth seat, his voice softens, and he describes a deeply moving vision which exemplifies his journey as a SAHD and announces the grand themes or narratives of his life.

I had this vision of this guy...it was a lake with pine trees in the mountains and I've never been there but it looked like what I would imagine to be the Canadian Rockies. There's this guy in a boat, in the middle of the lake, and he is paddling with one oar but he is not paddling on both sides. He's just paddling on one side but he's not going in a circle. He's moving forward on his own.

As I hear the words coming from Scott's mouth I imagine this man, Scott, in unfamiliar territory; the terrain is rugged and wild, and yet the lake is placid. The wilderness is untamed, pulling him in with some strange magnetism. He paddles with one oar, on one side. He is doing it alone. He is doing it without the influence of the feminine. He is moving forward and is not surprised. This is a moment of pride for Scott. He feels happy. He is content. He is calm in the wilderness of the unknown as a SAHD, and yet, I feel something is missing. These themes will reemerge throughout Scott's story.

## Scott

*“Fatherhood is being committed to it and saying I’m going to do this.”*

Scott is a thirty something father of two young children. His wife works full time and he has taken the role of the SAHD. He is well educated and received a college degree in English. He is a life coach, a writer, a voracious reader, and a lover of anything intellectual.

We meet many times over the course of a year and a half; a timeframe that is filled with many critical incidents, or transitional periods that are announced throughout our dialogue. His mood varies in the interviews as he anticipates the birth of his second child, its fulfillment with her birth, and the many sleepless nights and adjustments that ensue. These transitions, coupled with the rapport that was built between the two of us, allowed the interviews to be very candid. The dialogue is real, filled with emotion, rawness, and grit. Most of our meetings take place in a local restaurant. He dresses casually, in shorts or jeans depending on the weather, usually accompanied by some type of graphic tee, with his favorites varying from a monkey as Che Guevara underscored by the words, “Viva La Evolucion” to his favorite “Pete Campbell (from the hit AMC series *Mad Men*) is my homeboy.”

He stands over six feet tall and weighs around 200 pounds. He keeps his hair short, styled, maybe a side-part, and buzzed over the summer after a failed attempt to do it himself. He sports a scruffy beard that varies in length throughout the course of the year. He stays abreast of all things pop culture and is hip to the latest literature, political movements, music, movies, and television series. He is a man that knows a lot about a lot; a modern day renaissance man who maintains a humble attitude. He is the young dad that lives next door. Maybe you have noticed him. Now is your chance to get to know him.

## Youth

I met Scott through his wife, Amy, at a local library. We were discussing my dissertation and she believed Scott would be the perfect participant. I was very eager to meet him and I remember waiting in the car before our initial interview. Scott was my first interview for this dissertation and I began visualizing our discussion. I was filled with anticipation and excitement as I gathered my recorder and notepads. I stepped out of the car and walked into the restaurant, there stood Scott wearing khaki cargo shorts and his red “Viva La Evolucion” shirt. We shook hands, said hello, and were seated. I remember feeling that Scott had a genuine feeling to his aura and I knew we would make a good team. I explained to him that I would ask a few questions and that we would let it roll from there. We started with his youth.

Scott was born in the Midwestern United States. His brother was born two years later with severe disabilities. Much of Scott’s childhood revolves around the care for his brother. Scott describes his brother as having “the capacity of a 1-year-old for his whole life.” His mother wanted to move to a larger metropolitan area to give his brother better care and opportunities. Scott’s father did not. They divorced and Scott moved with his mother and brother to a large Midwestern city.

This time period appears to be somewhat cloudy for Scott, but he remembers hearing his paternal grandmother saying, “I can tell you that the problem did not come from our side of the family.” His grandmother’s voice is significant because Scott believes her domineering influence led his father to regret some of the decisions he has made over the course of his life, mainly the divorce from Scott’s mother. Scott recalls being a young child and his mother stating that his father “did not fight for her.” Scott believes she may have postured with a demand for divorce and his dad responded simply by stating “Okay”. Scott still wonders if his dad just didn’t call her

bluff, like it was some sort of dare, a game of chicken in which he said, “Okay, I am fine with that.” I believe this divorce tormented Scott in his youth and in very subtle ways that play out in the present, mostly estranged, relationship with his dad.

Due to the instability of his parents’ relationship and the demands of his brother, Scott did not want to add further problems to the familial dynamic and felt immense pressure growing up to be the “good boy.” He wanted to make his family proud and did not want to place any extra burden, particularly upon his mother. He states, “One of the things that from a young age, I was always taught to be the good little boy; didn’t rebel too much.” So, Scott didn’t ruffle any feathers, but this came with negative consequences such as being forced to be the center of positive attention and suppress his anger and frustration.

I think for me, since I was kind of the center of attention and my brother was kind of off in the shadows, I think there was a sense that I had to be what everybody else wanted. And by the time that I got to be that age where I could rebel, and I wish that I had more, I don’t think that it occurred to me. And, I think that my mom is very assertive; and I think she wanted things a certain way. I think there was a certain level of fear, like I don’t want to piss her off. So, it is easier to just do what she wants me to do.

Learning to suppress emotion and parts of who Scott was as a young child while growing in an environment that focused on how to care for his brother may have led to some of Scott’s anxiety which he felt immensely in his adolescent years; however, Scott also sensed that he needed to be an anchor, the stability within the family unit, which included his grandparents, and as a consequence his own needs suffered.

I think that I always felt like when I was a little kid that my mom had so many problems with my brother that I had to be the stability. In addition to that, I’ve learned a lot more about my grandparents, especially my mother’s parents...she was an only child and my mom was going to make sure that I wasn’t an only child because she didn’t want me to go through that. And, in a sense, I kind of ended up being that way because my brother ended up going to a group home when I was eight and he was basically gone for pretty much the rest of his life. So, I think that with her parents it was very much about appearances to a certain extent.

This notion of keeping up appearances, acting as if everything was okay, suppressing real feelings, all in which, to meet expectations resurfaces throughout our discussions.

It was more through perceived expectations, like with my brother. One thing I feel like I got robbed about is that my brother and I didn't come to realize this until I was older, my mom I think was so worried about my quality of life in terms of my brother. As far as how would his disability affect me, how would people perceive that, how would friends that came to our house perceive that; everything. But, I kind of feel like I was so sheltered from it; that I didn't have the relationship with my brother that I could potentially have had. I think she cared more than I did. She even told me at a certain point, if you feel like it, tell people that you are an only child. And, I never really felt that way and I think my mom did what she thought she had to do at the time, but I don't want to have been the reason that she did that. I think my dad always looked like my brother was a problem that couldn't be solved. And my mom looked like my brother was a problem that could be solved.

I can only imagine the impact of being told that you can tell others that you are an only child must have had on Scott's fragile, young psyche. I believe Scott grieves the missed relationship with his brother, but was caught in a familial tug of war of expectations between his mother and father regarding his brother, which may have forced Scott to choose sides. As we talk, he is open with his thoughts but does not elaborate much about it with others; however, it is clear that how his parents handled it was difficult for him. Once again, I cannot help but think, as I sit at the booth at the restaurant, a mother, whom he deeply loves, with the very best intentions, telling her son that it is okay to tell his friends that he is an only child. Scott never wanted any part of that and I think he enjoyed his brother when he had the chance to be around him.

As we talk, I feel empathy for Scott as he describes his childhood. I can almost see the scars hidden deep within his inner child. Scott furthers the dialogue and describes having a "really tough time as a kid."

I had anxiety issues and I was just one of those kids, pretty much a loner. I barely made it through Junior High, not because of academics, but because I missed so much school, because I just had anxiety issues and had this thought that I was going to be bullied every day. I know that depression runs on my father's side of the family and I think I got some



of that. It was tough; there for a long time I didn't even want friends. I know it affects me now.

In adolescence Scott felt isolated, retreated into his bedroom and began reading books. It is within his adolescence when he became a voracious reader and developed his love for literature. I believe he enjoyed disappearing into another's world. He began reading Hemingway and Salinger and he describes being obsessed for a long time with these authors and that it worried his mom and grandma. They were concerned with the education he was receiving at school; however, the books helped with the depression and anxiety that he was feeling. He states, "Even though I struggled with it [depression, anxiety] in high school, I've always felt like I've been able to, without sounding terribly pompous, kind of like look into the abyss, but step back from it." He then describes a scene from one of his favorite television programs, *Mad Men*, where the main character, Donald Draper, who also had his own set of childhood drama, looks down an empty elevator shaft and walks away. As Scott is describing the scene, I recall it as well. I also enjoy *Mad Men* and the recalled imagery of the scene moved me along with Scott's interpretation. This image profoundly resonated with Scott because that is how he has felt from a very young age; that he could step back, walk away from all the outside, periphery happenings which were affecting him internally, especially within his family, and ultimately find happiness.

## **Dad**

*"I worked away from him; instead of what would my dad do, I'm like what would my dad not do."*

Over the course of our interviews Scott's rocky relationship with his father is a major recurrent theme within our discussions varying at different levels of estrangement and by the end of our time together they had become completely estranged. This relationship with his dad has had tremendous impact on how he currently lives his life. Because Scott is naturally

introspective and his work as a life coach pushes him to better himself, he is consistently doing the “work” on himself as he strives to become a better individual, husband, and parent. He looks to his dad as a benchmark of how not to parent, and possibly, how not to live your life. Yet despite this, Scott loves his dad and offers excuses and empathy for his dad’s behavior.

My dad was raised by this very domineering woman, who they [family members] say now that she possibly had mild schizophrenia; very mercurial moods, just happy one minute and angry the next. So, maybe bipolar...very possessive of him and borderline, somewhat abusive.

My dad has this story where as a toddler he wandered off down the street. And this is just weird to me. She found him and actually drove him home with a stick, made him walk in front of her. I don’t think she hit him but kind of was swiping at him. And the other story that freaks me out is when he was a little kid he had this duck. I think he won it at the state fair or something or the county fair. Loved this duck. Its name was Colonel Duck. He went to dinner one time with his parents to his Aunt and Uncle’s house and my grandfather was a land developer. They were considered in that town fairly well off, so this wasn’t like they were poor. So, they’re sitting there eating lunch or dinner or whatever. And, he says, what are we eating? And his aunt says, Colonel Duck. Just completely off the cuff is the way he tells it. And my reaction is that there are so many things wrong with that. His reaction is very much like he was heartbroken, you can tell, but it was almost like it happened and that was the way it was.

Scott takes a breath and digs a little deeper. He believes that he can see the little boy in his dad who was never told that others were there for him. Scott believes his dad lacked the comfort of knowing he wasn’t alone. Because of this, Scott thinks his dad did not learn to show true affection and make deep connections. He announces, “He is affectionate in the sense that he hugs me, he will be affectionate. So, it’s not a choice, it’s more just kind of he doesn’t know how as much.” Therefore, as a kid, Scott’s reaction was that his dad did not love him. His mother and stepfather would show affection, but his own dad would not. As a young child Scott pondered this lack of affection from his father and would ask himself, “Why doesn’t my dad do this?”

Scott discusses how these behaviors influence how he parents today. The emotion contained in his words is intense, yet are underlined by a desire to express love to those around him.

I basically made the decision early on that (a) I wanted kids, and (b) that I would give them what I didn't get. I knew what they needed. There are times with Amy and I, where Amy will admonish me for something with Jack and I think I get irritated in a general sense, but it is almost an extra irritation because it's like, that's bullshit, because I know what he needs and what he wants because I know what I didn't get.

Then Scott makes a very profound statement that sends shivers up my spine and I realize just how intensely Scott desires to protect his own children and heal his inner wounds from his childhood.

Eventually Jack will be able to think for himself and say no, this is what I really want, but right now I look at it like I need...you know...I'm the one... and it's not even just a need, it is that I want to do that because I feel like a reconnection with the little boy in me.

I hear these words and it is clear that Scott longs for his dad to fulfill his role and father him, yet Scott intuitively knows it is not going to happen; therefore, he has, in a way, began to heal his own pain through his relationship with his son.

I kind of feel like I have to get this resolved to move on. For the longest time I thought that I had it resolved, like I honestly thought...if you told me a year ago you're going to be estranged from your dad in a year I would have been like ok...but even though our relationship wasn't much, I miss it more than I ever thought I would. Amy has a good point, she thinks part of the reason that I'm so angry is she says you're such a good dad and you make the effort and you see that it's not that hard. I mean it is hard but it's not that difficult to at least reach out a little bit, a minimum even. I think that probably is part of it because I never get jealous, but I am a little bit envious of Jack in the sense like him getting so much more than I ever did. And I'm glad of that; I'm thrilled that I can provide that. But sometimes it's like wow, even a 10<sup>th</sup> or a 20<sup>th</sup> of what I do would be good. I probably would be happy with that, maybe I shouldn't be and I should expect more...and I've even tried to lower my expectations with him because that's what Amy says to do. I finally told her, I really can't lower them anymore. I'm at rock bottom; there's no more. I can't go any lower.

Scott reports his relationship with his father has varied on different degrees of estrangement, yet he longs for his father to see Jack but excuses his absence because his dad was not taught to feel at a young age.

He only sees Jack once, at most twice a year. And there again, it's not even like a bad person kind of thing. It's more like he just doesn't think about it. He doesn't think. Like with me, I always think about the long game. He's not going to be around forever and my son is going to grow up and he only has this little window and we need to take advantage of it now. And my dad doesn't think that way. I think it is more...it's not like oh he's an asshole, what an unfeeling person. He just doesn't...you know from a young age he wasn't taught to feel that kind of thing.

Scott continues to further disclose his dad's inability to make meaningful connections and its impact on his relationships with his children.

My dad has been there but not been there. He has checked out a lot of the time. So, even when I'm around him, I don't feel like he is present... He did come out for Melanie's birth. Every day with Jack and now with Melanie I think about, it's not even about being better, but what did I need as a kid that I didn't get from my dad. And that's the way that I approach it with Jack and Melanie.

As mentioned, Scott's father and stepmom visited and stayed with Scott and Amy after the birth of Melanie. Scott further discusses the lived experience of his dad's visit after the birth of Melanie, which ultimately led to frustration and anger. He states, "I was so frustrated and needing to get out of the house that I even went to Walmart, for God's sakes, on a Friday night. I hate Walmart." The frustration he felt seems to stem from the inability to connect beyond the surface. He recalls drinking beer and watching sports with his dad, in an attempt to make some type of connection, but describes a dad who had "just kind of checked out." It is clear Scott wanted much more from the visit and yet did not achieve it. After days of going through the motions, his anger turned into confrontation.

It was uncomfortable because there were certain times when he and my stepmom, with Jack especially, they always had to...like whenever he would do something, like he would throw something on the floor or anything that was considered misbehavior, they would have to comment on it. So, my dad would say stuff like, you're going to get in trouble or you're cruisin for a bruise. Stuff like that; stuff that he would say to me when I was little.

Once again, Scott describes the reemergence of the damage done to his inner child which manifests in the present moment. Scott continues,

My wife and I were like...the whole getting in trouble thing, he's not really getting in trouble at this age because he is learning, he is just pushing limits and neither one of us really look at that as trouble. The whole cruisin' for a bruise', there's about 20 different things wrong with that.

Scott almost grimaces as he recounts this story. Scott, in general, is very calm, an easy like a Sunday morning kind of guy; however, I can sense the anger and frustration within him as it exudes in his tightened posture and sharper tone of voice. Hearing those phrases and knowing what that felt like as a little boy, pushed Scott to finally stand up for his child within and his own son, Jack. He states, "I just said to my dad, don't say that, he's not in trouble."

I find myself cheering inside, thinking this must have felt good for Scott to stand up to his dad, and then the mood quickly shifts to sadness as Scott declares that having the time and opportunity of the SAHD role with his children makes him feel bad for his dad. He states, "Number one, I feel like he missed out; and number two, I look at the way that he was raised. The stories that I hear about the way that he was raised, I get why he is so detached." He continues,

There have been so many times over the years where I've tried to talk to him. Literally, a year and a half ago we were almost estranged because some weird stuff happened after Jack was born. I could sit and talk to him for three hours, until I'm blue in the face and I don't know if he would ever get what I mean. I would hope in 20 years, 30 years, that if Jack came to me and needed to talk to me like that, I hope that I would get it, and I think that I would, but my dad he just doesn't...he has a very strong sense of love but he doesn't know what to do or what to say unless he's directed to do that. I'll give you an example: My stepmom really pushes him to do things and get out of the house. He just likes to hang out at home. If it wasn't for her he would just be at home all the time. He is very withdrawn is the best way to put it. I think it is easy for people to become that way because they forget to stay awake, and just fall asleep. Plus my dad is very much like everything happens to him. He doesn't realize that everything he does dictates the choices of his life. He thinks that everything externally happens to him. It's so and so's fault, or that person cut him off, or that person is an asshole. Nothing is really his fault.

Scott concludes his focus on his dad by recalling an experience at a retreat shortly after the birth of his daughter. It was a time after the birth of Melanie where lack of sleep coupled with

transition led to relational issues with Amy. He fully expected to address what he was feeling towards her and yet his child within crept out again.

I literally lay down on the floor and one person sits on this arm, one person sits on this arm, and another person sits on my legs. My coach was the one who facilitated the process. You get as angry as you want to get and you get as pissed off as you want to get and you know that you are totally safe doing it because you aren't going to hurt anybody doing it. They're not going to let you up to go crazy. So, I just went for it and went crazy and got it all out. I realized that I wasn't angry. I kept expecting to go to the anger that I had about Amy and I just didn't really feel angry with her. I think it was more the frustration of the situation. What I kept going back to was the anger at the relationship with my dad. I literally ended it, covered with sweat, almost hoarse from screaming. It was awesome! Afterwards, there were eight of us, they were like, Wow, you look totally different.

Despite all the anger and frustration that comes with a lifetime of ups and downs with his father, even continuously excusing his poor behavior, Scott, like most men, recalls seeking his father's approval, "I think the only thing he's ever said about being a SAHD is, 'I don't know how you do it,' but other than that I don't think he's really ever said much about it."

### **Dad Revisited**

After piecing themes together, I realized that there was more to Scott's story with his father; therefore, in our second to last interview I opened it up for further exploration. During this interview Scott talks about feeling down, angry, and sad; feelings that have been identified as a direct result of the current status of the relationship with his father.

I've told you about my dad; not the best relationship. He is very distant; not present physically or emotionally or mentally or anything. Do you remember that he and my stepmom came out for Melanie's birth? When they were here it was challenging because my stepmom was in the kitchen all the time and that is my domain. Every time she would leave the kitchen and I'd go in there to do something she would come back in. It was challenging but it wasn't anything, like no fights or this is horrible, nothing that out of the ordinary... On Thanksgiving, Amy and I talked to both of them on the phone. We usually go to see them for Thanksgiving but this past year with Melanie being born we just couldn't do it. I had a great conversation with both of them on the phone. Everything seems fine, nothing strange. We said we are going to come next year for Thanksgiving. On Christmas, the first indication that anything might be out of the ordinary, I never heard from my dad all day. Finally at 7:30 that night I called him. He was really withdrawn, he had been sick; but I almost got the feeling that if I hadn't called him, I

wouldn't have heard from him. So that's kind of strange. It seems like a red flag now, but at the time I just thought it was a little out of the ordinary, like that's weird. Nothing really came up. My birthday was in March and I remember talking to him then. All of the sudden probably around April or May I just didn't hear anything for several weeks at a time and I think I even called and left a message, still didn't hear anything. So finally, on Father's Day, we sent cards and everything; never heard anything, called and left a message. Never heard anything from him for Father's Day. Amy had gotten a Mother's Day card so it wasn't like we were completely cut off. So throughout the summer I kept calling and calling and never got anything.

Finally, I was pissed off one day and admittedly this is really petty but I've never really been angry towards him or really just gotten pissed at him. I think this was in July I texted him and I said something about, you know, you're really shitty because basically I hadn't heard anything forever. He responds back and he goes off on this whole tirade. If I wanted a response by doing that then I got hit. And he said, 'I'm shitty huh? What about how mean you guys were to us back when we visited? And, not getting anything for Mother's Day or Father's Day?' And we had sent things to them for both holidays. So I texted back and said, 'I honestly don't know what you're talking about but I would love to resolve this, I would love to talk about this.' I even said 'like adults.' Never heard anything. So finally, my stepmom left this message on my phone. She was talking about how she sent Melanie's birthday card first and it was going to get there before Jack's and she was sorry for the mix-up. And it was like, why is this even an issue? Then, at the end of the call, she said your dad has really been having problems with his back. He can barely walk and he is going to need surgery. So I immediately was like, well ok this is at least some explanation. Come to find out my stepdad about five years ago had the same surgery. So I was talking to my mom about it and she was like, it's not comfortable but it's not life threatening. So I thought well this is strange. So I called him again and left him another message right before his surgery and said I'd like to know when your surgery is and I wish you'd call me back. It was a really heartfelt message and I thought this will finally...nothing.

My stepmom sent a birthday card for Amy. It was weird it had like all these little covert messages. She wrote on the back of the flap of the envelope, Jim's surgery is October 4th. By this point I was really kind of like, done. I was like; I'm tired of basically throwing things into the void and not getting anything back. So I sent him a Get Well card...still nothing. And way back in July, when this really started getting heated up at that point, I talked to my old coach and she was like you know, you should just call him and say dad, we are adults let's resolve...you know, she just acted like it was no big deal. Well, gradually what's happened is Amy is to the point where she is beyond done with him. Amy basically says I think he is an asshole and he has always been an asshole and she's just gotten more and more frustrated. With me, I think I've been more emotionally hurt on the surface and the anger is there but the anger comes out in other ways. So finally, about 2 or 3 weeks ago, Amy is like you've got to go see somebody, you've got to figure out...you've got to talk to somebody. So I literally sat down and called 5 therapists.

I think more than anything I want closure because part of me is so angry, the child part of me is so angry that like...you don't get the last word. You don't get to not call me back and not be in contact with me. It's not even that...I don't know...what's funny is I talked to my mom about it and my mom said my grandma, his mom, when she got to be I don't know how old...I think she lived until she was 76 but when she got older, like the last 10 years of her life, she got to be where...she always had mental issues and was never treated for it; but same kind of thing like just writing people off for no reason. Just this person did this...like one of the things that I always felt bad and as angry as I ever got at my dad, the one thing I always felt bad for him was she never accepted my stepmom. And instead of calling my stepmom by her name, or like that woman, or even like bitch, she would call her that thing and she would say that to my dad. So believe me I know what he is coming from, like his upbringing. His dad was pretty checked out, he was a nice guy but he was at the office a lot and his mom was like, was like Mommy Dearest, like his mom was nuts. So my mom wonders if maybe he is getting that same thing. Which, if that's the case it makes sense but it's still...

I hear the sadness in the tone of Scott's voice. He is angry, yet he seems to have some sense of clarity. He continues to make excuses for his dad because he loves him but presently Scott wants to move on and realizes he must do it alone.

Now, recall the imagery of the man in the boat in the wilderness. He is still isolated, paddling on one side with one oar; however, imagine this man, who is alone, as a child, the child within becoming stronger, begging for a relationship with a man who can guide him, to teach him how to be a man, and finally obtaining the strength to confront and overthrow him. The boat continues to slowly float on.

### **Love and Marriage**

Through our interviews I learn that Scott met Amy through an online dating service. They developed a strong friendship that materialized in marriage. A few years later they welcomed a baby boy into their lives and Scott's journey as a SAHD began. But I wanted to know more; so, on a frigidly cold winter's night, I invite Scott to the house. We sit down and have a conversation about how the two of them met. Scott outlines their love story. He begins by



describing some of his dating history to give me some perspective on where he had been before meeting Amy.

I should tell you how Amy and I met. I had done Internet dating way, way back when it first started, probably 2002, in its infancy. I mean this was before eHarmony. In fact, when eHarmony first started I joined because they had a free 30 day trial or whatever. It was terrible. It's gotten a lot better. In the beginning, they had a lot of people on there, and oh my God, some of the dating stories. I went out with this one girl, the first girl that I met on eHarmony, it's kind of a long story but I'll try to keep it short because it's pretty funny. Have you ever been to the Rio downtown? The place with the three margaritas and that's your limit. Well we were going to be there. In those days I was late for everything. I mean, I kind of am now with kids but not as bad. I was probably five minutes late, like it wasn't a big deal at all and I'm walking down the street and this girl is walking towards me on the same block as the Rio, same side of the street, probably about 30 paces from the door. This girl is walking down the street towards me and I'm kind of like, huh, that kind of looks like the girl from eHarmony in the picture. But she's got a grocery bag and that can't be her. So I get there and sure enough the hostess is like yeah she just left. I'm like, she left after five minutes seriously? So I run back and it was her and we go back inside. She says, I bet you're wondering why I have a bag of groceries with me. I say, yeah I kind of was. It ended up that she lived with her parents in the suburbs. They told her they wanted her to clean her food out of their fridge even though she wasn't moving out or anything. So this was in the winter and she not only brought the food with her in the car, but then brought it into the restaurant even though it was January or February. I was like okay that's weird. Come to find out, this woman had told me on eHarmony that she was a school secretary, but her real passion was that she wanted to be a mortician. It gets even better. In high school, her best friend died in this car crash. She was the one who embalmed her, she also embalmed her grandmother. So I was just like really creeped out. So all the red flags are there. The thing that finally did it, I guess this is really superficial but it had to be something. All the sudden at one point during the date I looked down and she had rolled her sleeve up. And there's just this thick black gorilla hair all over her forearms. And I'm just like, I don't think this is going to work. So I wrote off eHarmony really quick, that was out.

I tried Match. I tried anything out there, you name it, I tried it. Well I gave up for a while and got sick of the whole Internet dating thing until about 4 or 5 years later and I was seeing this coach at the time. She was like, why don't you just get committed to Internet dating and just do it? Just do it for like six months exclusively go on every date, go out with every person. I was kind of doing that anyway the whole you got to kiss a lot of frogs... well I went out with a whole bunch of other people that didn't work out. And Amy's picture was really funny, I always joke around about how she had two pictures, I don't even remember what the second one was... but the first one, like her profile picture, was this really weird picture that was from the side and it was like someone had taken the picture while they were walking past her. And it ended up that she took it herself and it was not a good picture but I couldn't really see what she looked like. So we started communicating online and it was terrible because we communicated for three weeks and

the first time we were supposed to meet I got really sick. She lived in a northern suburb at the time I actually lived near there. But for some reason I don't remember why, we were going to meet in downtown. Well she had gone all the way downtown and I wasn't going to cancel initially and then about two hours before the date I just said I can't, I can't do this, I have the flu. So I called her and I could tell she was disappointed because she had already gotten ready and everything. I said I'm really sorry but I'm going to have to reschedule. So we rescheduled and this time we decided we were going to meet uptown. But I was house sitting for my parents at the time. It ended up that two of my friends are getting married a month later and she called, the bride to be she calls me up, and he was out of town and she was like I don't know if I should get married I'm really nervous. They are married now, Amy and I actually went to their wedding and they are really happily married. But she had been in a really bad relationship and I think this guy before had been pretty abusive. I think she even like hid out at her parents cabin up in the mountains for awhile. So, she asked me if I could go to lunch. I was like oh yeah sure because I wasn't meeting Amy until three. As I always tell Amy I had to talk her off the ledge and basically say that Jeff is a good guy that it's going to be ok... well it took a while. By the time that I leave the place I realize that I'm going to be really, really, really late. I'm just like this is not off to a good start at all.

I called Amy, and I explained the situation and said I am really, really sorry that I'm going to be like 45 minutes late. It was so hilarious she said something like you're just lucky that I'm really nice and really patient. It was just funny the way she said it I was just like yeah it really got me. That was a really good line. So I get there and we met, it's not even there anymore but there used to be Bookends cafe right next to... Yeah it's not there anymore it's like a restaurant now. In fact whenever we walk by there now I always tell Jack, you see that restaurant there, it didn't used to be there. So I go in, and I sit down and she's just like beet red. I was just in a mood where I was like I got nothing to lose here and going for broke and I said you must be Amy, and why are you so red? I have no idea why I said that. And she laughed and said I guess I'm just really nervous. So we talked for a while and hit it off.

It was kind of weird though, because we went on a few dates. There for a while I was like what is the deal with this girl, I can't get a read on her. Because our second date we actually went to Margaritas here in town because she lived up here. We also went to that Starbucks afterwards where I first met you. So we had coffee and everything and I liked her but I just felt like there was something off, something behind the scenes that I wasn't seeing. So my coach was just like why don't you just give it a shot and see what happens? Because in those days I was super, super, like the whole Seinfeld thing where if there was one little thing it would just spook me and I was out of there. And so my coach was just like why don't you stick with it and see what happens? So we went to the botanical gardens; that was our third date. It was a fun day, but a really long day because we went to the music store and went to Starbucks; just a good day. Even then I felt like there was this distance and I didn't know what was going on, like what is your deal? I can't decide if she likes me or not. So I dropped her off at her apartment and I lean over to kiss her like I'm just going to go for it you know. And she gets out of the car, like I lean over like this. And she says something like, it wasn't this but was something along the lines of I've got to go and jumps out of the

car and walks away.

Part of me, I was like what the... Part of me, I was also thinking that I dated a lot of girls where weird stuff happened. So literally driving away I said to myself, there goes another one, back to the drawing board. So the next day she texted me and said something about well that was weird yesterday wasn't it? I was kind of annoyed, like what is her deal why won't she just leave me alone? She's not interested, what the hell is the problem? So I said yeah I kind of played along and she said can I call you? So she calls me up and she says I'm really sorry about yesterday. I'm really, really, super nervous. I got out of the car and I was just devastated because I was like I really like him and I just blew it and it's all over and blah, blah. Is there any way you can forgive me and give me another chance? We went out again and it was funny. This is like super, super... It was even more awkward now and we went to this place downtown, a Mexican restaurant. We sit down and I'm just kind of playing the whole thing not for laughs but I don't care what happens. You, kind of by verbalizing the whole thing, you've kind of spoiled the magic. So I asked her, what's the deal are you interested? Are you not interested? She said no I am. I'm just really nervous. Well come to find out she hadn't dated all through college and had some bad experiences in high school, so because of that I just exaggerated everything that I was just like okay let's take it slow. Can I hold your hand now at the table? Is that okay? That kind of thing. It was funny because at the end of the night, we had a really good time and I felt like everything was you know... and I even asked her the end of the day, is it okay if I kiss you, is that okay? And she was like yeah that's fine. It was funny because once we broke the ice, it was a lot easier. I went away for about two weeks, I think I went to see my parents or something and we were seeing some family. We texted nonstop while I was gone. She came over the night I got back and it was really funny because I was living downtown then so I went downstairs to the lobby to let her in and she said I brought you this aloe plant and these cookies. She made these cookies you know and I said that's cool. She came upstairs and I had this bottle of wine that was super, super, old, but super shitty. It was really bad wine. I said do you want some wine? And, she said yes, sure. I open the wine and we both take a sip and it was just God awful. It wasn't even like Olive Garden type of wine, it was just really bad. I said that's not very good is it? She was funny because without giving too much details, this is the funny part we just started making out and that was pretty much it. Then all the sudden I think I got nervous or something so like 20 minutes after I said so do you want to go eat dinner? So we ended up going to an Italian restaurant and she was just like in the beginning, so, so nervous; just super nervous. Wasn't even sure about me holding her hand and it was just one of those things where honestly under any other circumstances there were so many things that happened that should have made it not happen in the long run but we just went with it. We really liked each other and it was funny because pretty much within a week she hadn't moved but she pretty much was staying there every night. We decided, probably six weeks later, that I was like I'm going to ask her to marry me. We were engaged for another year and half. But it was one of those things where we were both late 20s and we looked for so long we knew exactly what we wanted, we had no doubts about that.

Even when we were still dating, even engaged we were like if we were ever to have kids one day we decided pretty much then about me being a stay-at-home dad. She was actually

about to start grad school for library science and she knew she wanted to do that. It was one of those things where we really hit it off and there was a lot of work in the beginning.

### **The Decision**

Scott and Amy decided that he would take on the SAHD role early on in their relationship and that it was a decision that was easily determined. Scott recalls a discussion he had with Amy before they were married regarding children and how this would change the familial division of labor. They both wanted children and when they did, if they did, thought it would be great if one of them could stay at home. Amy stated she wanted to focus on her career and asked Scott if he would take on the SAHD role. He thought it would be a great idea.

I said I would love that. I think that would be awesome. I still feel that way. I still feel like it is the best job I've ever had and there are days where my coach always tells me, 'There is a certain point in time where you are going to get sick of this and you are going to want to do something else.' And she always says how 'it's not in your makeup, or per se natural, for a young guy to be doing this all of the time.' And I get, there some days I'm just like 'ugh', but at this point I'm still up for it. I'm still...because what is hilarious is when Jack does go to the babysitter I miss him. I have a great time on my own, I enjoy that freedom, I think that is probably the best thing I can say about being husband, father, SAHD; you know it's really good if even when you have your freedom, you miss it.

### **Stay-at-Home Dad**

*I guess I feel like I have to be different and sometimes it gets old. I'm like really, you are different anyway so quit trying so hard to be different because you are just that way. You don't have to fight it so much. And, I think it took me a long time but I'm getting to be more who I am and more comfortable with that because it is tough being outside the mainstream. And, sometimes, I just think about it too much and it's like you've got to stop thinking about this and just do your thing.*

Scott describes being a SAHD as the best job he has ever had, yet there is a sense of ambivalence to the role that creeps into the conversation which may stem from non-conformity to a societal role filled primarily by women. Scott states, "Men of an older generation, I would say starting 15-20 years older, are just kind of...that's [SAHD role] so completely foreign to them they would have no idea what that would even look like to do that." He continues, "Stay-at-

home moms are typically, from what I've seen, are out all the time. They are doing stuff all day long. Go, go, go, go, go." Although Scott isn't necessarily going all day long, he has figured out a way to make the role work for him and has even blocked out some territory that is his own.

If I go to story time [at the library]; the story time I go to is pretty much all moms. There is one grandma, but a couple of times there has been another guy there and I'm always like, 'I'm the dad here. Why are you here? What is your deal?'

And, he declares, "It is a territorial thing, where it's like I'm supposed to be the stay-at-home dad here." Yet, despite this urge to define territory, he relishes the appearance of more dads in his daily routine.

Sometimes that's where you get kind of singled out because it's complimentary and it feels good, but at the same time it's kind of like it's not that different from a woman doing it. I mean, it is and it isn't. Especially when you have large groups of people like I started swimming lessons with Jack two weeks ago and he loves it. But, it's funny because the first class I was the only guy there. I thought I'm just going to have to get used to this. And, then afterwards, it made me mad like I don't want to have to get used to anything and so the second and third classes were much better because there were two dads at the second one or three and I was like thank God it's not a big deal. I think it is pretty common. I guess it is the one thing about being in a family oriented community is that it is not as uncommon as other places.

Feeling judged for fulfilling a role can be difficult. He describes what he perceives a male family member who adheres to the traditional family role is thinking of him, "I think he is thinking the same thing of me that I am thinking of him but in a different way, like it's total bullshit and he doesn't like it. And, yeah, just kind of that, 'what's up with this guy, what's his problem?'" These judgments lead to resentment and ultimately the questioning of the role, "sometimes I don't mind it and other times it gets really old after a while." He continues,

The role probably fosters my introversion even more because it has not been easy for me to go out and make friends. Being a stay-at-home dad enhances that because most of the time when you go out, typically it's moms with their kids. They are acting like your kids are there but you are not, which is always a little bit like I kind of get it, but at the same time it pisses me off.

Within SAHDs, Scott has noticed some contrasts in parenting style. He describes another SAHD who he met at a SAHD meetup.

The other guy had two kids and he was telling us how bored he is when the kids are down and he has done all the chores in the house. And, I wanted to be like, ‘Are you kidding me? You’re bored. What is wrong with you? Those are precious minutes and you are bored.’ My first reaction was to call bullshit...He even said, I get all the laundry done and I get all this stuff done and then I’m kind of bored and I’m like who in the hell ever has the laundry all caught up? It is never all done. And, you are bored. I just though no way, there’s no way you’re bored.

Scott could not believe that a dad wouldn’t relish in the freedom a two hour nap would provide him. I chuckle, understanding his sentiment.

Scott has identified that keeping his independence, even in small increments, and creating personal space is a key to maintaining personal happiness and sanity. He states, “I love my kids to death but they are definitely one part of my life, maybe even half or more of my life, but there are these other things too”. He continues, “I’ll go to Starbucks and read for two hours because that is getting out of the house and it is doing something that keeps me from going insane.” Furthermore, “I think the thing is that you crave escape. It is kind of like that balance that I want freedom, I want to get away, but I want to be there too.” And yet, “I never have had a thought like, ‘Oh, fuck this. I’m going to run away’...fatherhood is being committed to it and saying I’m going to do this.”

After the birth of his daughter, Amy took maternity leave. Scott recounts being nervous about Amy going back to work and managing two children by himself. One day during the maternity leave he told her, “Do you realize that eventually you’re going to be gone and I am going to be doing this every day.” In fact, he even began to question his desire to continue in the role of SAHD. He states, “I first had that realization about a week after Melanie was born if I really even want to be a stay-at-home dad anymore?” He decided to live his words, walk the

walk, and stay committed, remembering the things that drive him to be successful in his role. He believes,

The best moments are definitely the ones where I feel like I'm doing something for them [his children] to make their lives better, which is more often than not. I still tell Amy, 'as rough as it is; it is still a lot of fun'. I try to keep that in mind during those rough times. The best moments definitely outnumber the worst moments.

## **Men**

*"I strive to be not that macho male kind of ideal anyway. I don't want to be like that."*

Scott is complicated, just like any other human being. He has resisted stereotypes throughout his life and has been willing to explore new frontiers, like being a SAHD. He is becoming comfortable with his masculinity, especially as he heals the wounds from his relationship with his father, yet he shares his frustration with the "macho" societal ideal which surfaces for him often with sports.

I told my friend, 'You know what sports are for? They are just to bring fathers and sons together so that they will have something to talk about.' For a long time I just felt like I had this pose of hating sports and now I'm much more like I can like sports and not be obsessed with every detail and statistic and player and have a happy medium. So that's one of the things, sports being the biggest thing. Probably like movies, I like action movies but they are really not my preference. I like foreign films; I like indie films, basically anything outside the mainstream. But at the same time, last week I went to see *The Expendables II*. You know it's kind of like that is my fun, my guilty pleasure, but my meat and potatoes is really the other thing. Same way with books, love to read pretty much everything. I guess I'm a little bit snobbier about books because they take more time frankly.

He moves the conversation to his perceived cultural ideal of masculinity within his community.

Living here, there's this image of what a guy should be and what he should do. I'm always trying to be aware of everything in my surroundings. I think there is this big misperception about men that men are just like give me a beer and a football game and I'm good. And, it's like no...yeah, that does exist, but I hate those stereotypes.

As Scott talks he exudes passion and frustration. I cannot help but think the frustration of a stereotypical man stems from his father. Scott states he dislikes the "macho bullshit" of men

getting angry easy and checking out, not being fully present. He reports, “I want to say, Wake the fuck up. Like where are you right now.” In this moment, it is as if Scott is speaking to his father because the sentiments echo the description of his dad’s presence. Although Scott does not describe his father as a typical male, you may recall, Scott attempted to reach out to his father after Melanie’s birth by playing the macho role through drinking beer and watching football games; an effort that must have stung Scott to the core.

### **The Introduction of the Second Child and Life in the Suburbs**

*It was fine at the hospital. We surprisingly got a good amount of sleep but when we got home the first night Amy is screaming at me about getting a bottle and how it is taking too long. I was like you’ve got to be kidding me. This isn’t going to keep happening cause I’m just going to go crazy.*

A few months before the birth of their second child, a daughter, Melanie, Scott and Amy ascended into the suburbs. This move had been resisted for many years, but they believed it would be better for Amy’s work commute and building friendships in a family friendly community; however, over the course of our discussions Scott often speaks of his disdain for the suburbs and its Stepford affect.

You move to the suburbs and your life is over and you eat at Applebee’s and drink lite beer with your friends. I know there’s truth to it, but it’s also bullshit at the same time. I don’t know, I just never wanted to be that person and I think part of me knows that I don’t have to be that way and the other part is invasion of the body snatchers with my brain sucked out or something.

Scott’s desire to be authentic, true to himself, which stems from years of his childhood being someone who he was not, makes it difficult for him in a suburban environment that feels fake and robotic. He reports the birth of his second child was challenging enough but was extremely arduous in his new suburban landscape.

I think that we both wanted the second baby but at the same time it’s like, ‘What are we doing too?’ It is difficult for me. I don’t think Amy sees it as much this way. It is difficult for me because I’m affected a lot by my environment and so when I see all these people around me in a community like this one where that’s pretty much what they’ve signed up



for with 15 kids or 5 kids or 6 kids, and I just think it makes me angrier. I rebel against it so much, that I'm sure 90 percent of the shit that I make up about stuff isn't even real.

After the birth of Melanie and the return from the hospital to suburban bliss, the severe sleep deprivation and acquisition to familial change wreaked havoc upon Scott and his growing family. Scott, fearing a loss of authenticity, describes the toll of the transition manifesting in misdirected frustration and anger which was often, and unfortunately, passed to the one he loves most, Amy.

The first day or two, I was really out of it, like it would take me 10 to 15 minutes to get a bottle together, especially in the middle of the night. Amy got really pissed. She said, 'Are you okay? You act like you have a screw loose.' So, I finally said, 'Are you kidding me? Screw loose, really? Because I'm just trying to keep up with all this shit.' So one night, I was just pissed; we were both just angry at each other. I said, 'You know what? It is a lot harder with two than with one.' Jack could be as loud as he wanted and it didn't matter because we didn't have a time bomb in the next room that could wake up and stay up. Jack does that; sometimes he'll just stay up half the night. So she said, 'Well, we can't give her back.' And so me thinking that she's kidding, I was kind of like, 'I know that, that's for sure.' Just kind of pissed, but joking. She got really upset. I told her the next day, 'Do you realize that I thought you were kidding.'

I can relate to Scott's difficulty, as I believe most parents can, to the effects of the sleepless childrearing nights. Scott remembers communication suffering with Amy during the period after Melanie's birth, which was difficult for him. He had always enjoyed the long and fruitful conversations he had with her and longed for them again. He refocused on doing "the work," fueled by his desire to get better and improve his relationships with Amy and the children. He states, "I want to know more. I want to get along even better. I want to keep building on this thing." Scott decided he was going to do a lot of work on himself and not worry so much about Amy making changes. He realized they were both feeling overwhelmed and that the best course of action would be to focus on what he had control of, himself.

During this time, Scott describes Amy's transitional frustration manifesting through raising her voice, a characteristic of annoyance, also possessed by his mother. In the past he may

have retreated to hide his true desires and wishes. Now, he wants to be true to himself and talks about this need to be authentic, not getting lost as he did as a child, even in difficult times.

You can get lost not being authentic. Then you just disappear. That's how after 10 or 20 years marriages blow up; people just take shit and take shit and take shit. That's why the other day I just started saying, 'I'm not going to respond to yelling. I'm not going to respond.' I think Amy's motive is she gets somewhat panicky, especially when it comes to a baby and all that. And, I certainly do too; I get the same way, but the yelling, that's kind of her default. My mom was like that when I was little and so I always tell her, 'You're being my mom right now. You can't. You've got to stop this.'

Once again, the recollection of childhood dysfunction manifests in the present. Scott understands this and has tried to make change. Not long after Melanie's birth and after a few weeks off from visiting his life coach, he went to a session. He recalls the session, which began by focusing on Amy's reactions and ended with him looking inward for change.

I think Amy has kind of a temper. But even when she isn't angry, she has this tendency to yell to get my attention. And so, if she is trying to talk to me, she'll just yell from across the house and I just really hate that. I don't respond to yelling well at all. And it is what her mom does. Her mom, instead of going to find her dad will just scream across the house. So whenever she is upstairs feeding and I'm downstairs, she will yell downstairs and it's funny because the whole thing with that happening and the baby being there. It's kind of like I don't respond well to that. So, in the beginning I think I was just rushing around trying to do everything to kind of appease her. I realize that I have this habit with her that I'm always doing that to try and calm her down. And it really wasn't getting me anywhere because I was just getting pissed off; blowing up occasionally, but just eating it and so I went to see my coach this week; I hadn't seen her for like three weeks because of the baby and everything. I went in there and I was in just a completely different mood than I am now. She basically says, 'How are you' and I said, 'I'm not good. This is not going the way that I want it to. It's not fun' and so she of course asked me, 'how would it be if it was exactly like you wanted it to be if you could have that?' And I told her about the yelling and our interactions and everything and it's funny because I felt like she basically saw me as...when I came in... as not being me and not being authentic and not being the true me, how I am. She said, 'basically you have to be authentic and you have to voice how you are feeling because otherwise you're just going to get lost.' And I was kind of telling her how it is tough for me anyway because it is a period of adjustment of moving to the suburbs where there is a totally different dynamic and I see how men respond to their wives and how they do just kind of get lost in terms of just adapting basically to what their wife wants. Part of it is, like with Amy and her family, that's how all the men are. The men are basically not seen as capable by the women and then they kind of, whether that's true or not, they start filling that role.

This is the antithesis of Scott. He is a SAHD and is very capable of carrying the childcare role, in which he believes he is succeeding. This incapacity that Scott perceives in the community is clearly a role he is not willing to fulfill; therefore, he made a conscious effort not to lose himself and remain authentic. He believed by doing so, his relationship with Amy would strengthen and they would grow together.

Even with this effort for growth, Scott began to fantasize about days when the grass was greener in the picturesque familiarity of his life in the city with only one child, Jack.

I think what was fun about Jack, at least the way I remember it now, it might have been totally different, I felt like we were a team. I think that is one of the biggest challenges since Melanie came along is that it doesn't always feel like we are a team.

He continues by declaring the importance of this team, this unified front, "That is probably the biggest piece of advice that I would give to someone who is going to have a baby is you've got to somehow get on the same page at least when it comes to working together, otherwise it is tough."

As we talk, Scott sits back in his chair, takes a sip of his drink, and focuses on the present moment within his family dynamic.

For example, Amy last night showed me this quote, something about look at your kids' faces and their feet today because they won't be that way for very long. They change so quickly and already Jack is almost 2 ½ and whenever I get frustrated I try to think of enjoy this time. It's tough because you want to enjoy the time, and I do enjoy the time because I love being home with them, but sometimes it's...especially lately with the transition periods...Lately Jack has been asserting his independence so he's really kind of pissy and yelling 'I want this now.' When he doesn't get it, he hits himself and screams. I'm actually pretty patient with Melanie and I'm pretty patient with him. I have been pretty much his whole life. But lately it has been a little more like, 'You're driving me crazy.' Then tonight Melanie is screaming and wanting a bottle and it's tough because I have this image in my head of what the ideal would look like and what Amy would think of this moment and what I should be doing. And that always trips me up because it's like, 'You're doing it right now. She's not here; you're doing what you need to do.' And, she's not home with them five days a week. I feel like we're going to this new period where when he first became a toddler, there was an adjustment period. Now, I feel like there is this other adjustment period because Melanie, I feel like she is days away from rolling

over and starting to crawl. So that's a whole other mess of stuff. I think what happens is Amy gets frustrated with me because she thinks that I look at it in a negative way and that I'm pissed off all the time. I'm really not, it's just I'll have those flare-ups. For the most part, I'm pretty unflappable. So if the anger flares up more frequently she's kind of like, 'What's going on?' And, it is really just me being a little more vocal. And then, how does this experience affect me? It's tough because when it was just Jack or when it was just Jack and Melanie was a newborn, she slept a lot more and I had a little bit more freedom to kind of do what I want to do, and what I need to do. Whether it is take a pee or make dinner or whatever it is. And now, it's more like there is a set period of the day that is like 2-3 hours that I might have to myself depending on if they are both asleep at the time, and other than that who knows what is going to happen?

After some time and through the transitional and often difficult periods of adjustment, Scott expresses gratitude and joy with the addition of Melanie and even describes an added balance within the home. He also believes communication is improving with Amy. He has learned to give himself space "to go out and do stuff" on his own. He discloses in the past he would feel guilty about it, but not anymore. He reports, "I've noticed that since we've gotten to the point where we are much better at taking care of ourselves and knowing when to give each other space, it makes the whole family unit just function better." Since noticing the need for individuality within the familial team network, Scott took a part time evening and weekend job in the public sector which he views as a tremendous benefit.

Therefore, on the weekends Scott may be pulling a red wagon with his two children seated within it, Amy by his side, or he may be working, maybe even wandering around town, looking like a true suburbanite or more realistically a struggling tourist pondering if he wants to fit in.

Last Saturday I started thinking about, have you seen *Old School* with Will Ferrell and I think Frank the Tank where he is like, I think I might go to Home Depot and pick out some wallpaper and stop by Bed, Bath and Beyond, if there is time. This is what it feels like, my life is on the weekends. And it is a real difference, but when we had one, when we had Jack, it just felt like we were a couple that had a kid. We were a family, but it didn't feel like we were a family. For some reason with Melanie, it is so much more real now.

## **A Boiling Point**

Whether it is the lack of sleep, the adaptation to change, the urge to unleash stereotypical masculinity, or simply the primal need to protect ones family, Scott reached a boiling point, not long after Melanie's birth, where his frustration bubbled and exploded.

After Melanie was born, that first month was literally like hell there for a while. We were at each other's throats and I found myself acting in certain ways that I never do. Honest to God, I never do this. Amy can tell you that. One night we went out for dinner, the four of us, and we are over there going to Higgy's [an ice cream shop] and we are going down the aisles looking for parking and this guy is backing out of this spot and there's a guy on the other side facing me. I know he is going to go by, he's not really waiting for the spot. But he didn't back up for the guy and for some reason I didn't really back up. I know now why, but normally I probably would have backed up for the guy. I'm not by nature typically a dick with things like that. I'm just kind of, okay I'll back up. Well, I just refused to and he backs up and he starts to drive by the car and he's got his window down and he is yelling. So I roll down my window, here again, not something that I would normally do. All of a sudden we are just literally yelling at each other with, 'Fuck you! Fuck you!' And I'm aware at the time that I have my two children in the back seat, my wife is right here but I was so angry that I literally didn't care. After a minute, we kept moving but he was like, 'You wanna go? You wanna go?' After that, I parked and we go into the ice cream place. Amy understandably is really pissed and I go in the bathroom and I'm on the verge of tears. I'm like, 'Where in the hell is this coming from?' I realized after the fact, none of that was really about that guy, and none of that was anything that I normally would have done. I was just so angry at the situation and how Amy and I have been at each other's throats that I just decided to do that. All of the sudden we start worrying about if Jack is going to start saying some of the things that I said and he didn't, he never said anything. But it was one of those things where I said I've got to take a look at this.

This description isn't Scott. He is gentle and caring. I was surprised by this story but understood and related to it. This moment was a critical incident that made Scott realize that he was not adapting like he had hoped and it pushed him to begin to look at himself and focus on the positive changes he could make with the addition and transition of Melanie into the family.

## **Donald Draper**

*You're born alone and you die alone and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts. But I never forget. I'm living like there's no tomorrow, because there isn't one.*

-Don Draper, AMC SERIES *MAD MEN*, Episode Smoke Gets in Your Eyes

Scott is a voracious reader and a film junkie, yet there is one character that Scott often talks about, Donald Draper from the AMC television series *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007). Scott explains,

Don Draper. There is something about that show. There is something about it that speaks to me so much because I love and hate Don Draper at the same time. I love the way that his internal feelings are and the way he has had such a shitty childhood and the way he can be empathetic because of that and his search for meaning.

Scott continues,

It really didn't start speaking to me as much until I knew that I was going to be a father and I think part of it is that Don really has that...and this is how I've always felt...has that struggle without being too highbrow...that existential despair. What does it all mean, what's next, what does it mean to be happy? I think that was probably the first thing that really drew me to it. When I saw how he was with his kids, like when he was first married to Betty, she was really kind of a bitch to the kids, really mean to them. And there was a little boy in him I felt like that was kind of saying, 'I've been there, I know how it is. You don't have to be this way.' I really feel like that is kind of where this whole idea of the New Masculinity came from is that show. I have a feeling part of the reason that show is so popular is there is this idea that men feel like a certain part of the male population feels like they have to reject the modern sensitivity and go back to that ideal of how he is. And I think there is a mixture, like you can have that manhood and masculinity but also have the sensitivity.

Scott concludes by describing what is so unique about Don, "For me I think it is that he was completely able to reinvent himself. But what is interesting is even though his entire existence is essentially based on a lie, he has this authenticity that none of the other men on that show have." No wonder Don is appealing to Scott; his childhood was difficult, he has reinvented himself and taken on a new identity as a SAHD and works to stay authentic and stay true to himself.

### **Parenting Styles**

Over the course of our conversations Scott describes the differences in parenting style between him and Amy. He also conveys that despite these differences there is a necessity to be on the same page with some type of uniformity. This process is extremely difficult and requires

open communication and confidence that one is doing the right thing. It becomes evident over the course of our discussion that this is often a source of frustration that ebbs and flows often into the provenance of joy.

Scott reports that he is a “helicopter parent” and the “more protective parent” than Amy; maybe this is in response to the lack of fatherly protection as a child or simply his nature.

I think I’m overprotective. I told Amy, ‘lately I’ve really been trying to give Jack a little space.’ Like when we go to the playground, I always used to pick him up and put him on the play set. The other day we went there and he started climbing the metal ladders and the rungs are kind of far apart. He starts yelling, ‘Help! Help!’ And, I said, ‘I’ll help you but I’m just going to be here and make sure that you don’t fall but you can do this. You got this. I know you can do this.’ And he got up there on his own and I think sometimes I baby him to a certain extent where it is easier, he knows it is easier for me to just do it.

However, Scott believes he has relaxed of late. I feel like I’ve mellowed out the last few months. It used to be that certain things would just drive me crazy like when Jack would try to run across the parking lot, and now I’m more like, this is what you need to do. I need you to stand here and wait for me.

The combination of parenting styles can be a source of joy and frustration but it never fails to amuse. Scott recounts a recent demonstration of parenting styles after overspending on pasta at Whole Foods.

We went to Whole Foods and we bought Jack this tortellini pasta for dinner last night because he just loves pasta. So we bring it home, Amy is warming it up in the microwave and it smells like shit. It smells like Play-Doh. She takes it out of there. I take a bite and it tastes awful and I think Amy was really kind of pissed off because we bought this from Whole Foods and their stuff is usually really good. So he didn’t want to eat any of it, so I started saying...when Amy and I talk to each other, whether they are bad words or not, part of our sentences we spell words so he doesn’t get the whole meaning. So I said, ‘This is C-R-A-P, I don’t blame him’, like I wouldn’t eat this either. I didn’t say that in front of him but basically why are we making him eat this. He doesn’t want it. She kept telling me, ‘Eat it, eat it.’ But I don’t want it either. She got really mad. Normally, I can get a read on why she is upset but she is just pissed off. Later, she said, ‘I was just really PO’ed that we bought that and you weren’t helping.’ I said, ‘Well, we wouldn’t eat that shit, why would you make him eat it when he didn’t want it.’ I kept saying, ‘Why can’t we just give him mac and cheese’, because he loves mac and cheese. So she brings that

out again today for lunch for him, and I'm thinking, why are you? And you know he didn't want it again. So I started talking again, 'You know it is B-A-D...why are you?'...and she got really mad. I think for her, she felt like I was criticizing her. I said, 'This isn't about you.' She's like, 'Do you want to make him lunch' and I said, 'Yeah, I'll make him some mac and cheese.' She was still upset about it. I said, 'I'm not criticizing you, I'm not saying that this is your fault. We don't want it, why would he eat it'. It's just funny that way.

Scott continues,

Amy said, 'I don't think we work well parenting at the same time.' And it is really interesting because Amy has these set ideas. She worked at a few daycares and obviously she is a Children's Librarian and so she's read all the research and she knows all this stuff. So we often have these discussions about what the books say. For example, one thing that was an issue this summer is I let Jack watch an episode of Tom and Jerry, and I get that it's violent and I get that it's probably not PC according to current standards, but at the same time I don't feel like that is going to scar him forever. She got upset and was like, 'He shouldn't be watching that.' It's funny because I've talked to my coach about this several times-she is like mid 40's and has a grown son-and she's like, 'I probably would have reacted that same way when I was that age with my son. Do you get that she doesn't know and you don't know, neither of you really know the right way to raise a kid? You have all these different things and all these people and all these books and all these ideas but you aren't really going to know exactly how it's done until you've done it yourself.' The other thing that was really interesting to me is I've always had this idea in my head that you should probably be on the same page as far as discipline. It's funny because I went to see her this week and she said, 'Why do you have to be on the same page?' And I said, 'Because that's kind of how it works' and she said, 'Well, what if your kids knew you two separately as two different people because you are, as two autonomous individuals once we get married we don't become one person...what if your kids knew you as daddy thinks this way about certain things and mommy thinks this way about certain things' and it really was kind of mind blowing. I think of myself as open to new ideas and everything but I guess I'd never really considered that...But I kind of like that idea that we parent differently when we are apart so why does it have to be the same when we are together?

Throughout this discussion it appears that Scott is still attempting to convince himself of the veracity of the words spoken by his coach. He pauses often and then the topic shifts to the exploration of family of origin,

I think that Amy and I were both raised a certain way that was regimented and there was a certain path to follow. But I know that I am much more open to, 'Hey, let's try it this way or that way.' She is very much stuck in her studies and in her books; what the experts say, which I'm not opposed to. I read some of the books too, but I just think that it doesn't have to be a certain way kind of thing.



He discusses the influence of Amy's work upon their family dynamic, in particular, parenting techniques.

She is all about the research and what this book says what that books says. I'm fine with all that but sometimes it's planned out so much that sometimes I say, 'Do you get that none of us really, really know; even those so called experts, they've got good tips and most of the time they work and most of the time they are right, but do you get that no one really, really knows the perfect exact way to raise a child.' Other than the basics of food and companionship and things like that, other than the basics there's so many things out there and so many ways of raising kids. On the other hand, I really do appreciate that she is so into that but when I get four emails in 15 minutes of research, it's like delete, delete, delete. That's what I want to do.

In fact, he jokes about what Amy's coworkers say, nicknaming them the "braintrust."

They always have these tips and suggestions, so I'll joke around with Amy and say, 'What did the braintrust say today. What is the tip of the day?' Because sometimes I'm just like, 'Are you kidding me, like really? We have to have more information and more things about we should do this and we should do that.' Sometimes, 'I'm like no, we have enough information, we've read enough.'

Scott expands on his resistance to the overwhelming pool of research that is sent his way on a daily basis.

Usually I go with my gut and it is more of that conflict when Amy comes home that we have two different styles that overlap but have a lot of differences. I think part of it is Amy and I were both raised with the idea of black and white and rules and structures, and we've separately gotten a lot more into the gray areas than our upbringing was. I think I'm more in the gray area than she is.

This could be due to more day to day interaction with the children which has forced Scott to move into the gray. Scott continues to recall the influence of family and its current impact on raising his own children.

I always joke around with Amy about the duality of man because that plays out all the time in the sense of doing what my childlike self would think I should do versus what I want to do. And so, as far as being a stay-at-home dad...what's great about Amy is that she believes in the idea of a lot of leeway with Jack, so she knows and trusts in the fact that he is going to be fine and we are going to have a great time and do our thing. But I think part of me is like...let's say I take him out for the day and he has Fruit Loops for lunch because sometimes that is what he wants and Amy is fine with that. But there is

always that voice in the back of my head saying, 'You shouldn't do that, that's not right, that's not what you should be doing.' And I think that definitely plays out in my relationship with my mother-in-law because my mother-in-law is very much tow the line, do what you are supposed to do, do the right thing. And so for a long time I had a really hard time being myself around her. I always felt like I had to be the little boy that she expects me to be and it is strange because to a certain extent I don't feel like, through certain things Amy has said to me, I don't feel like she trusts men and so I think part of me is like, I have to be the shining example. I have to be the Blue Ribbon kid who is the exception to the rule.

Scott believes Amy has some of the same ideas as her mother. He states, "I think sometimes my wife has the idea subconsciously that men aren't capable and I always fight against that. I'm always like, 'No, that's bullshit and I'm not going to put up with that.'" And yet, deep down Scott cares what those close to him think, even his mother-in-law. He states, "Even though I know that it is ridiculous and really prideful, on Jack's birthday a couple of weeks ago she [mother-in-law] was talking to him and she said, 'You have a really good daddy that takes care of you.' And I thought, 'Wow that's great she acknowledged that.'"

Scott reports, "Amy freely admits that there is no way she could stay at home with the kids all the time." And like any couple, they struggle to find balance within their roles.

I think what happens is she [Amy] gets...if I'm working with Jack on working through something...if she is hearing it in the next room, if she feels like it is spinning out of control and I'm not handling it right, she jumps in. And finally, I told her I said, 'Who gives a shit if I'm not handling it right? If you don't like hearing it, close the door. Go to another room. That's not my problem, that's not Jack's problem, it's just a different kind of style.' The one thing, and part of it is she feels like she does have that extra expertise so she'll say, 'You know, you should do this, you should do that.' But I don't feel like on the surface she thinks I do it wrong or something because she'll all of the sudden realize wait, you do this all of the time, so why am I? And one of the things that I got really upset with her about, probably like the first week, one of the things that I'm always concerned about is Jack coming to me more...being like 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.' Which since she's been home [maternity leave] has been great because he has been going to her more and it is more balanced. But I'm always concerned about that and I've always told her over the last two years I've said, 'If you feel like that's an issue, I want you to hang out with him more on your own.'

So they strive to find balance and unity and have developed a new rule to address issues of discontent. He states, “Amy and I have this new rule where if you have a piece of advice or a tip, please ask, can I offer a suggestion instead of just saying, ‘Well, I do this. Maybe you should try this.’”

Despite his early frustration to the adaptation of the arrival of his daughter, Scott freely expresses his love for Amy and the positive influence she is in his life and returns back to a quote Amy shared with him. He states, “look at your kids’ faces and their feet today because they won’t be that way for very long. They change so quickly...” When he is frustrated within the transitions of parenting he attempts to stay focused.

Transition periods are a constant within childrearing, but each one lasts only a short period of time and if couples are able to weather the storm peaceful periods tend to ensue.

What is interesting is that with Amy, we are in a good period right now. We’ve been a lot more communicative, a lot more focused on time alone when the kids aren’t around; even if it is just conversation. Like she came home for lunch today and the kids were at the babysitters and she was like, ‘It is so nice to have an uninterrupted conversation with no toddlers saying, ‘mommy, mommy, daddy, daddy.’ Because sometimes you can’t even finish a short story about what happened during the day or whatever. We are giving each other more leeway lately, definitely trying to do regular date nights; whereas, in the past it was much more sporadic. The addition of a bottle of wine never hurts either, we definitely drink a lot more wine than we used to. Seriously, there was one night about three weeks ago where Jack was at my parents for the night and Melanie was asleep, so we went outside and we literally each drank a bottle of wine. It was crazy because we always say that there are these moments in our marriage where we kind of fall in love all over again. There is this really good theory that my mentor/coach has and I completely subscribe to it. She says, ‘People never really fall out of love.’ She says, ‘People get divorced and say they’re not in love with someone anymore; that is never true. It’s always the fact that you have to get back to that fresh love. You have to work towards it.’

And, Scott and Amy seem to have found it in the midst of the chaos around them.

### **The Lived Experience**

*For the day to day, as far as lived experience, it is hard separating the mundane from the more ethereal. For me, being a coach and wanting to help people, I try to work on myself all the time; whether it is marriage or me or my relationships with the kids. It is tricky because when you are*

*a stay-at-home dad you're kind of worried about what they're going to have for lunch, what we are going to do next, when is nap time? I think it is hard for people anyway to get out of that day-to-day grind but with kids it is even more so. It's kind of funny, it's almost a dual thing where on one hand it is really kind of magical because you see them at their most honest, their most authentic, because right now they are nothing but those raw emotions. They are like I want this now, this is what I feel, this is what I need. On the other hand it is that mundane part of taking care of another human being. I guess for me lately I've been trying to get more into meditation a little bit and being just a bit more mindful. I notice that even if it is just for ten minutes or so that I'm trying to zone out and not think about anything, once I come back I have all of this clarity about ideas and things that I want to do or ideas about the kids. So it is a day-to-day struggle of getting frustrated and realizing what a great opportunity it is and I'm always going back and forth between the two.*

The typical day as a SAHD is full of ups and downs. Scott describes what it is like for him on a daily basis. He recounts the beginning adjustments with Melanie.

Somebody said the biggest dilemma about being a parent is when you are away from them you want to see them and then when you are with them you want space. Jack is getting a little more challenging because he is getting more independent. For the most part with them it is still a lot of fun. It used to be when Jack, and Melanie was first born it was like, 'How am I going to make it through the day?' That was a big concern.

Yet, Scott has made it through the days and he continues.

Melanie usually starts stirring around five but doesn't wake up until six or 6:30. Jack is usually sleeping. She sleeps probably six hours at a time at night... Mornings are fine. I help get Amy out the door and make breakfast... Typically in the morning we do breakfast first... the kids are still kind of groggy and a little bit dazed, so they are a lot calmer. Mornings are typically just getting adjusted to the day.

Scott expands.

Typically after breakfast we're just kind of getting adapted to the day, getting a frame of mind. I'm very haphazard with our routine. They always say with kids you are supposed to have the schedule and keep them going on the schedule and I am trying to do this new thing where I institute at least one field trip a week somewhere. Because a lot of times in the morning, sometimes I can't even tell you what I do in the morning because I look up and it's like, eleven. They eat breakfast, they usually play a little bit, I might do some dishes, some housework as long as it is not too in-depth and I can keep an eye on them... After playtime Jack has lunch around 12 and goes down around 12:30 or 1.

He continues.

Lunch is nice because three days a week Amy comes home. So that's time where we can talk about whatever is going on and she can help me out a little bit. Thursdays and Fridays she isn't home for lunch but Monday through Wednesday she is. Thursday and

Friday is kind of pretty low key. Lunch is usually pretty easy. Afternoon is wonderful because that means naptime, though Jack is phasing it out, I think. There were two or three days last week where you could tell, he's like I'm not sleeping. I kept him in his room and said, 'Buddy, even if you're not going to sleep you need to rest' and that is kind of, as Louis C.K would say, that's like my Carnival Cruise because I might watch a little TV, do quite a lot of reading, get some writing done.

Scott describes the routine after naps as, "Once Jack gets up we will have a snack and hang out. Sometimes we got outside or to run errands, it just depends."

The evening routine takes a different shape which is influenced by the pre-children history of division of labor within the home.

Then at night when Amy comes home, the kids are hungry, she is kind of coming off a long day, and I'm coming off a long day, so it's that immediate clash. Like tonight I made this new recipe that took triple the time that I thought it was going to take. I think sometimes Amy has this idea that I can do it all and more. Part of that is my fault because before we had kids I set up this role for myself where I was this big support system for her and I was this big caretaker. So I made dinner, if she needed to study during Grad School, that's great. So now with kids even though logically she knows that I can't do everything, I think somewhere she still has that idea. So it is challenging. There are the kids and dinner and she'll be like, 'Can you do this during the day.' And I'm getting to be a little more like no, or we'll see, or I doubt it. I have a hard time saying no when people ask me to do something. I'm usually like, "Sure, that's fine, I can do that, I have a whole day.' Because in the morning it seems like the day is endless and there's going to be so much time and it never happens that way.

He delves deeper and describes adjustments that they have learned to make.

It used to be that I think when she came home it was kind of this verbal diarrhea, like I hadn't talked to an adult all day and it was just like I had to get it all out in the first five minutes. So of course she was overwhelmed; Jack would get upset because I was paying attention to her and not him, so he would act out. Lately it has been more like giving her space. I feel like lately I've learned to notice cues more, whether it's cues from the kids or from her. Usually non-verbal cues when they're like, 'back off' and 'give me some space'. So a lot of times when Amy comes home now I might either make dinner...like last night she and Melanie went outside and hung out. Jack slept until 6:30 yesterday, like from 2 to 6:30. So she and Melanie just went outside in the backyard and hung out while I cooked dinner. I was basically raised to where my parents got home, we had dinner, and you just downloaded everything instantly, this instant brain dump. I found with the kids and definitely Amy it's better to have that buffer time and then talk about things at dinner and after dinner. Plus, Amy and I have instituted this new thing of for the first hour after the kids are down we do our own thing separately whether it's like chores or reading, or a

project you want to work on and then usually like 8, well, 9 or 9:30 we will come together and we might watch TV; but just that kind of buffer for a while.

Then it is off to bed. Scott describes the bedtime routine.

Bedtime we try to switch off where I'll put down one and Amy will put down the other but Jack's super into me reading stories, he's always like, 'I want Daddy to read. I want Daddy.' Lately I've been really trying to push the idea of Mommy's going to do it tonight; Mommy's going to read you stories. Because with me he is attached to me at the hip and for a long time it was really tough because he didn't want to do stuff with Amy. Finally, the last six months he has been much more mommy oriented. Which I'm like, 'Thank God' because he still wants me to do it a lot but it's nice for him to be wanting mommy too.

He continues, "I'll change his diaper, put him in his PJs, brush his teeth with him; sometimes we both brush teeth with him and then once that's done she comes up and reads stories."

### **Future Reflections**

*Whether it is emotion, thought, opinion... if there is one thing that I could say I want for my kids the most, I want them to be fully expressed and aware of everything around them.*

Scott often looks to the future in our dialogue and contemplates how what he is doing today will help determine what his children do tomorrow. His voice becomes more contemplative in tone when he discusses the future.

I think the thing that I struggle with mainly now is I don't want Jack to come back 10 or 20 years later and instead of saying, 'You weren't fair enough; you were too fair; like you should have disciplined me.' I always think about what is the balance there? Because I always worry, like I love having kids, I always wanted to have kids, but about six months before he was born I started having this thought of everybody has problems with their parents. I want to have the least amount of problems possible with my kids. So you are almost at a point where you are second-guessing yourself. 'What could this create? My behavior here, what could this create in the future?' There again, sometimes after a while, it's like you just got to give it up. You've just got to be you. I think the biggest misnomer with men, whether they are stay-at-home dads, or not dads at all, or whoever they are, is that men are all action and no thought. And I think that is bullshit because the majority of guys that I know, that I have coached, whatever it is, they have the difficulty getting out of their head.

He stops and takes another sip of his drink and recollects a time when Amy was pregnant with Melanie.

I think for me, I don't really regret anything. I'm exactly who I want to be, but at the same time I want Jack to be unencumbered by so much bullshit. And I know he is going to have his struggles because the struggle is part of the fun... For example, we were coming back from her appointment at the gynecologist and we went to the fabric store and I'm always like...yeah, I always go to the fabric store because it's funny to see all the guys sitting in their cars while their wives go in. Sometimes I sit in the car, sometimes I go in. And so I went in with her and there was this woman there and my wife has gotten to the point where she hates it when people say, 'When are you due' and 'Do you know what the sex is?' When she's tired or hungry she is less polite than I am and so [laughs] she's like, 'I was probably really rude' and in my head I'm thinking 'Yeah, you were' but I'm not going to talk about it because then I'm going to get the burden. I said, 'You mean you didn't make her feel comfortable at the expense of your own feelings?' She started laughing and she said, 'I know that is how I was raised but no I didn't.' I think that is the main thing because we were both raised that way and so I don't want Jack to feel like he has to be a certain way to make people happy. I want him to be a nice kid. I want him to be polite, but at the same time I want him to be him. Because for a long time I don't think that I got to be who I am in terms of I always felt like I had to play a part or be something that I wasn't.

And then, Scott relaxes and makes a wish for his children.

I told people right after Jack was born...nothing but pure emotion. He doesn't worry about other people's opinions yet; he doesn't worry about their reactions. He does what he wants and knows what he needs. And so for me it is kind of inspiring but it is also kind of sad because I know there is going to be that paradigm of...I know that eventually sooner versus later that whole mother-father-teacher-preacher thing is going to kick in. But, I want him...I guess, from me, what I try to teach him or create is just this idea of happiness through...not necessarily that you can do whatever you want to do, which is true, but you can be whoever you want to be.

### **The Vision Revisited**

You have completed Scott's story. Now, imagine a man in a boat with an oar paddling on one side. He has taken you through his journey. He has faced his father and is resolving his demons. He has become a man by working to defeat the beast within. The child has evolved. He is not alone. A woman is on his side paddling with an oar. They are in unison. The boat is moving in a direct line. Two little ones are nestled by their sides as they drift off into the sun's setting light upon the wilderness. The future remains untold.

## PART TWO: ANALYSIS

In a very candid moment during our interviews, Scott discussed a vision that he had that not only addresses but exemplifies many key themes that have been present throughout his life.

Scott the English major, avid reader and prolific writer often spoke in metaphors. He stated,

I had this vision of this guy...it was a lake with pine trees in the mountains and I've never been there but it looked like what I would imagine to be the Canadian Rockies. There's this guy in a boat in the middle of the lake and he is paddling with one oar, but he is not paddling on both sides. He's just paddling on one side but he's not going in a circle. He's moving forward on his own.

The man in the boat is Scott and he is alone; being alone is a theme that is infused throughout his narrative. Scott is the oldest of two boys. His brother was born with disabilities that created conflict in parenting between his mother and father which resulted in a divorce. When Scott was eight years old his brother was moved to a group home which limited his ability to build a meaningful relationship with him; at that point, it was as if Scott lost his brother. He was told that he could tell his peers that he was an only child, that he had permission to move on. During our interviews Scott expressed frustration with this, even a sadness that ebbed with anger, that he never had this chance as a child to forge a powerful sibling relationship with him before he died a few years ago.

After his brother moved to the group home, Scott felt a lot of pressure to be the star, the golden boy. So much attention was directed toward him that he felt he must fulfill his role perfectly. He became the light of his family. In many ways he took an altruistic stance, one of Freud's mature characteristics of defense, which assisted others, mainly his parents in the avoidance of negative feelings, but by doing so he suffered greatly. The striving to be perfect and the suppression of his own feelings of loss led to personal difficulties in his adolescence and he struggled with anxiety and depression. His isolation grew and he resisted attending class; not



because he couldn't do the work, he easily could, but he did not want to face the bullying. It is at this point that he began to retreat into his own world and voraciously read anything he could get his hands on. His new friends, with names like Hemingway and Salinger, were philosophical giants that opened up his world as he sat alone in his room.

It is important to note that being alone or isolated has never been a negative for Scott. In fact, he prides himself on being self-reliant. In another metaphorical moment during our interviews he described a scene from the hit television drama *Mad Men* where the lead character, Don Draper, looks down an empty elevator shaft, essentially looking into the lonely abyss, and then walks away. Scott believes he possesses this ability too, because regardless of what was happening around him in his youth he could pull away and make sense of it while maintaining the positive light within the family.

Being alone, in the boat, was common for him, at least emotionally, as a young child and early adolescence. Despite having a better relationship with his mother than his father, he did retreat to his own fortress of solitude, his room, to be taken away on exciting new journeys. His relationship with his father, on the other hand, was much more contentious and continues to be to this day. During our interviews, Scott often protected his dad by making excuses for his lack of fatherly attention over the course of his life. Scott wanted nothing more than a real and genuine relationship with his dad and has been willing to overlook his weaknesses. He stated in our interviews that if he could have had one-tenth of what he gives to Jack during his own childhood that he would have been overly satisfied. Unfortunately that was not the case; therefore, as Scott parents, he works away from his dad, meaning whatever his dad would do in a situation, he attempts to do the opposite.

Despite unrelenting efforts to fix or make better his relationship with his father, Scott has finally accepted the possibility, and more likely, its inability to be fixed. I often felt this deep sadness as he spoke about his father during our interviews. He would often split his dad into all good or all bad characteristics trying to make sense of him, but Scott is too psychologically advanced to stay in the black and white, concrete space and would always move into the more abstract gray, seeing his dad as a whole person who appeared to have the incapacity to make things right between the two of them. It was as if Scott would look down the elevator shaft and watch his relationship go down with it; and then, sigh with sadness, and back away. Learning to let go of this longing to have him in his life has been a struggle and I suspect will be for many more years, if not his entire life. I believe Scott is reminded of this, even if it lies deep within his unconscious, every day as he looks into the mirror and sees a man, himself, and a little boy, Jack, who is in his arms. His hurt is erased every day as he gives Jack what he did not get from his own dad as a child. By doing this, the wounds may be vicariously healed and a cycle potentially broken.

As Scott matured, graduated high school, and attended college, his desire to add another to his boat grew; however, he was unsuccessful in finding a mate until he met Amy through an online dating service. Their courtship is outlined in his narrative as they fell in love and were married. Early in their relationship they decided that Scott would take on the role of SAHD and, once again, add a more potentially isolating role to his life. However, Scott was exhilarated to do it and during our interviews he described it as the best job he has ever had.

As a SAHD Scott felt the isolation and the watchful eyes of others as he performed the role in public. His experience is similar to other SAHDs who find themselves as the token male at many daily functions. In his vision Scott described a solitary man paddling with one oar.

Instead of moving in circles, he was moving forward. The obvious interpretation that Scott addressed is that he is living without the daily influence of the feminine. He is confident. He is happy. He appears content. But as we moved through our interviews, I realized that the man on the boat is not fulfilled and more realistically desires the influence of the feminine. He doesn't want to be alone. He wants to work as a team.

Being autonomous within a unit is something that Scott and Amy have worked on during their individual and parental journeys. They both realized that allowing each other independence and freedom outside of the relationship also encouraged a blossoming within it. Finding unity and teamwork within the parental discipline and rules can be difficult and has been for them. During an interview Scott stated that the biggest piece of advice he could give someone who was going to have a baby is that it is important to be on the same page as one's partner. In another interview, after meeting with his life coach, after a tough and sleepless few weeks of newborn parenting, he contemplated if it was even necessary to be on the same page. His coach asked, "Why do you have to be on the same page?" She encouraged him to explore if it would be better for his children to understand that dad thinks one way and mom another. When he talked about this, I could sense his ambivalence and it appeared that he was trying to convince himself of the idea as we spoke. I got the distinct impression, possibly lodged within Scott's subconscious that he would rather be together in the boat with Amy than float in two boats individually side by side.

There is an aspect of selflessness to Scott's personality; he wanted to be a good son, he desires to be a good husband, and hopes to be a good father. As a young boy, a son, he often suppressed his needs and desires while the family maladapted to his brother's disabilities. He tried to shine a light into the darkness of a family unit that was falling apart but couldn't save his

parents from divorce. As a husband, he took on many of the daily household chores while Amy attended graduate school which has set the tone for familial division of labor, a precursor to the SAHD. And, as a father, he accepted the role of SAHD focusing the majority of his time on his children, often sacrificing his needs for theirs or the family in general. But as one gives up parts of self, anger and frustration may build if they are not replenished. It did for Scott.

Over the course of our interviews Scott became a father to his second child, a baby girl. As he and the family adapted to their new addition, the changes weighed heavily on Scott. During this timeframe, Scott experienced two critical incidents, with strikingly similar themes, that were life changing. First, after a long week, the family decided to go out for dinner. After the meal, they went for ice cream. As Scott was attempting to find a parking space he got into a verbal yelling match with another driver which was laced with profanity and misguided angst. This type of behavior is highly unusual for Scott but given the current state of his adaptation to change coupled with lack of sleep, he unleashed a piece of the stereotypical masculinity he resents. After he parked the car, his family went into the ice cream shop. Amy was visually upset and he was a mess inside of his own mind. He walked into the shop and immediately rushed into the bathroom fighting back the tears. Once again, his desire to hold emotion within and put up an appearance, as he was taught as a child, took its devastating toll; however, this time it exploded and his subconscious was heard. This gave Scott the chance, if he wanted to see it, to change; he looked into the mirror and realized he and Amy had to get on the same page but not the same line and that he needed to make the individual modifications to make his and his family's lives better.

The second incident occurred during a therapeutic weekend in Sedona. He described the experience in detail during our interview and it is presented in his narrative. He lay flat on the floor with one individual holding down his right arm, another his left, and another his legs. He

was told to get as angry as possible and let it go. He decided to go for it, thinking he could release all the anger and frustration that was lodged deep within his psyche. He trusted those around him and fully expected his anger to be directed toward Amy and the struggles they had adapting to Melanie; however, this was not the case. His anger was encompassed by his father and his lack of a genuine relationship with him. After he screamed, yelled, and released his anger, he was covered in sweat, almost hoarse from the experience. He described feeling free and those who participated said he looked totally different. Through these events he began to apply what he had learned in therapy and coaching and vocalized rather than suppress his emotion; he began to see himself for who he truly was and despite misdirecting his anger, he vocalized and recognized it. Throughout our interview process he shared experiences of positive growth, allowing the boat to steadily move forward.

Scott's isolation has been outlined and a lot of it is self-imposed. He resisted being part of a group, just to be part of it. During our interviews Scott talked about his frustration with traditional male stereotypes and how this may have hindered his relationships with other men. At one point he reported sports were simply a way to bring fathers and sons closer together, maybe only physically in the same room, as they drank beer on the couch. In a heartwrenching moment during our interviews Scott described a time when he resorted to this type of superficial engagement in an attempt to bond with his father; unfortunately, it did not work. Scott is a deep thinker and enjoys a genuine connection with others and is not interested in fulfilling certain prescribed roles. He craves interaction through dialogue and genuineness. He also resents the suburbs because of the robotic feel of it. He despises conformity and the group think that can be so prevalent in suburbia; however, he has slowly adapted to it as his family becomes more rooted in the community.

Yes, Scott is genuine. He is raw but most importantly he is relatable. He is truly the SAHD next door. He has his wounds, his weaknesses, and he also has strengths; especially the recognition of his faults and desire for growth. He is a man who has worked hard to better himself. He wants nothing more than to be a good husband and father. In a very powerful and heartwarming moment during our interviews he stated,

I told people right after Jack was born...nothing but pure emotion. He doesn't worry about other people's opinions yet; he doesn't worry about their reactions. He does what he wants and knows what he needs. And so for me it is kind of inspiring but it is also kind of sad because I know there is going to be that paradigm of...I know that eventually sooner versus later that whole mother-father-teacher-preacher thing is going to kick in. But, I want him...I guess, from me, what I try to teach him or create is just this idea of happiness through...not necessarily that you can do whatever you want to do, which is true, but you can be whoever you want to be.

His life experience is contained in these final words. It is as if he is talking to himself, the internal dialogue in his mind: Be pure emotion. Do not worry about others opinions and reactions. Do what you want and know your needs. You can be whoever you want to be!

The vision is now revisited. Scott has decided to be in unison with his family. Now, he is in the boat with an oar on one side. Amy is in the boat, on the other side, with oar in hand. Two little children, Jack and Melanie, are with them. The boat continues to go straight but this time it is complete, full of life and vitality, as they head off into the unwritten sunset.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SEAN

#### PART ONE: HIS STORY

##### **Prelude**

*I waited to be an older parent for a couple of reasons: so I could break the cycle of what I grew up with; so I could be a healthy male figure that is responding to the actual moments that are happening, not be responding based on my history and past experiences; so that I could be authentic in the moment; to get to a point where I could break those circles, get to a point where I was a good enough at enough different things that I could be there for my kids; that I could spend enough time with them to be a part of their growing up. That first early chunk of years is just...that's it...because after a while on their own they are going to start doing their own stuff. And I'm pretty honest with myself... I don't make any illusions to them wanting to be around dad for the rest of their days. Right now they are just sweet, and cute, and loveable and they want to spend time with me and I want to spend time with them just setting up the building blocks. We've gotten enough feedback, even at parent-teacher conferences, to hear who they are as human beings, how they talk to other children, the friendships they've made, how they carry themselves, how they express themselves, that it has made a difference. It is the whole nature versus nurture, but what if you could nature and nurture, instead of having one or the other. Where would a human being be in that arc of time?*

##### **Sean**

I met Sean through a local librarian who knew of my study and recommended that I contact him. We arranged a time to meet and discuss my study and Sean quickly agreed to be a part of it. Sean dresses casually for our interviews, usually wearing jeans and a t-shirt, maybe a hoodie on colder evenings. He is a few months away from 50, but looks much younger. He stands over 6'5" tall and weighs around 225 pounds. He possesses a physically commanding presence. He is full of life and speaks loudly, annunciating his words with passion. We order coffee and sit by a window. It's winter and the coffee is soothing. We typically start with some sort of small talk. From our first meeting, I feel a connection between us, more than merely a commonality as SAHDs. I look forward to hearing his story; as we sit down for our first

interview, I lean forward and ask, “How did you become a stay-at-home dad? How did that evolve? How did the decision happen?” Sean smiles and gives me a look, as if he is asking me “are you ready for this?” I smile. He then begins.

## **Childhood**

*“I was seeing all of the paradigms and cycles that were not working.”*

Sean waited until he was in his 40s to have children because he wanted to work out the inner turmoil that developed over the course of his life; the seeds of this turmoil planted very early in his childhood within his family of origin. He was born in the Northeastern United States in 1964 and graduated high school in 1982; the time between was filled with a loving, yet often unhappy mother who was in a traditional role and a father who was not present but maintained his authority through his physicality and abuse. Sean describes this dynamic as, “It’s the mother’s job to instill all her fears and it’s the father’s job to instill all his demons in his children.”

Sean’s parents were married in a “shotgun” wedding. A few months later he was born. Sean has memories that date back as early as 1966 and 1967. He remembers watching Star Trek on Friday nights and seeing the Vietnam War on the news every evening. The teachings of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X along with the civil rights movement impacted Sean deeply. He remembers growing up with the news buzzing; shifts and currents within the psyche of American culture evolving rapidly. He remembers his parents being forward thinking for the time as compared to other adults that he knew, yet conservative. A few years after his birth, his family welcomed the arrival of his brother, and two years later, his sister. During his early childhood, which he describes as “very patriarchal,” his dad would go to school throughout the



week and work on the weekends while his mother gave up her career as a teacher to be at home with the children.

Sean remembers lacking positive male role models as he grew up. He was desperate for that influence and looked to Hollywood for inspiration and, like many others at the time, found John Wayne. He recalls watching him with his parents and ultimately becoming disappointed.

He (John Wayne) doesn't know how to talk to anybody. He gets drunk, he has fistfights and his solution is to shoot people. If he gets stabbed he pulls out the knife and throws dirt in it. I'm like, what is that? They didn't have any good examples to go with. Their generation was one where they were babies during World War II. When all the parents came back from going to World War II nobody talked about it, nobody wanted to. That was that whole generation that drank and smoked to excess because that was their way of self-medicating as a way of dealing with it.

He describes growing up in this type of self-medicating household of "do as I say, not do as I do." The dynamic of hypocrisy grew old quickly. His parents each smoked two packs of cigarettes a day and his dad would have two double Scotch on the rocks when he came home from working at a Youth Development Center. He remembers being forbidden to talk with him for at least the first thirty minutes after his arrival home. His dad would sit in his chair with his drink in hand and watch the local and national news. Sean gave up early in his childhood of having any real discussion with his dad; he thought, "Never mind, dad." He became invisible. This infuriated him because his dad worked with troubled youth but his first instincts were to drink and "reach out and smack and hit his kids."

The tone in Sean's voice as he states the words "Never mind, dad" is haunting. I visualize him as a young boy, stonewalled with hidden emotion, learning that masculinity was based on anger and physical dominance. Unfortunately, as Sean recalls, the lack of positive masculine role models continued with his grandfather. His paternal grandfather was a professor and head of his department at a local university. He describes him as an intellectual who spoke five languages; a

favorite pastime being “deciphering languages” and “translating operas.” When he visited his grandparents he would go by himself; they only wanted one grandchild at a time. He remembers seeing his grandfather walk down the hallway to his study, checked out, with no desire for interaction. Sean asked his grandma what was wrong, wondering why he didn’t want to be a part of his life. She responded, “He has his brandy,” which Sean interpreted as being too drunk to interact. Once again, a father figure who put the drink first. Sean states, “For some reason, it was understood that if you were very intelligent you were allowed certain vices.”

Like his grandfather, Sean’s father “called all the shots” within the family until his mother “kicked him out.” This was a welcomed surprise to the children within the family. Sean describes this time period as a “blossoming” time for his mother and an era of relief for Sean who was “glad” for many reasons.

Being Irish-German, I think he had it in his head that you’re not a man until you beat the crap out of your dad. Some kind of long alpha-male bullshit thing passed down through generations. So him leaving first sort of spared me that, not that I wouldn’t have done bad at that point because I started working out when I was thirteen...I’m going to kill my father, I’m going to kill my father...everyday, two hours. I was pretty big at that point. Once I started to grow I went... 6’5”, 220 lbs. But growing up in that where the mom cooked all the meals, cleaned all the stuff, did all the laundry, stayed home with the kids, if you needed something, basically you went to mom because you weren’t going to have a conversation of any import with your dad. It’s not going to go anywhere either, the guy has dealt with troubled youth all day and got paid to do it so he was ok with it, but at that point I don’t know if it is still the same. Social Work more or less is fairly thankless with not a very high success rate either. So all these guys are drinking and smoking and bitter, borderline alcoholics and manic-depressives. Yay!

Being a clinical social worker, I agree with Sean that social work can be a thankless job, but it does not excuse his father’s behavior. As Sean speaks it becomes evident that he desired more from him throughout his childhood. I was also touched by the relief in Sean’s expression of not having to confront his dad physically. I believe this allowed him to focus on moving forward into a new beginning beyond the home he was raised in; college and adult life awaited.

## **Post High School Timeline**

Sean graduated high school in 1982. He then went to college and graduated in 1985. After graduation he worked in New Jersey and Pennsylvania for a few years. In 1987, he moved to New York City and lived in Brooklyn. He worked as an assistant to a photographer who photographed rock artists and celebrities. During this time, through his job, he met Grace Jones, James Brown, and the Cure, among others. Sean's love of film also prompted him to act and toward the end of the year he took a 10 day trip to California because he was interested in pursuing more acting and thought Hollywood may be a good change of pace, an escape, a place to break out. The trip was primarily speculative. He also believed it would be a good time to pursue this difficult career; before "real responsibilities" like marriage, kids, and a mortgage. The trip went better than he anticipated and he procured an agent and made plans to move. He returned home to Brooklyn, dumped his apartment and headed west on a motorcycle. He then picked up a job at a local restaurant and eventually became an Assistant Manager. The job allowed the freedom to audition. He did this for seven years and grew tired and weary, especially due to all the rejection. He decided to head for the mountains where he met a woman who was ten years younger than he. He believed he was in love and they soon married; a year later, they were divorced when he found her cheating with another woman. Five years in the mountains was enough, but during this time he finished a technology degree which he hoped would open more doors for him. He wrestled with the consequences of his failed marriage and decided to move back east to reconnect to his roots. Three months later, he found work at a big firm in Manhattan. It wasn't long after that he met Lisa on a blind date. He had a long list of questions for her which she enjoyed. He wasn't interested in playing the game, especially being 35 years old with one

failed marriage. Two years later they had moved in together; fast forward another two years and they were married.

We both married older. So we were very pragmatic about the whole thing, seeing each other for about a year, and then moving into an apartment. I had my computer room set up in there and I was working corporate at the time. She said she wouldn't go in on the house with me until she was engaged to be married. So, one morning I ended up having everything set up and proposed to her there. It took her a minute to catch on to what was actually happening. Then we ended up getting a townhouse together. We had a nice, long engagement. It was two years or so. I ended up getting married just before I turned 40. She was early 30s when we got married. We wanted to plan out when to start to try to have children. She figured she didn't want to be much older than 35, just for complications, or if it doesn't take. So we had a year or two leading into it with how are we going to work, how are we going to handle our things because we both wanted to participate in the raising of the children. She always wanted one pregnancy, but I wanted two kids because I didn't want that only child complex. So the talk we had was if she has one pregnancy but has twins, when they are healthy enough I get fixed, deal! I didn't want to be an old dad going through that a couple of times.

## **Wedding**

Sean and Lisa had a “long engagement” followed by a “destination wedding” at an eastern beach with the wedding on the sand. Lisa's brother, a notary, performed the ceremony. Sean's brother was the best man and Lisa's sister was the bridesmaid. They asked their friends attending the wedding to wear their “loudest” Hawaiian shirts.

On the invitations it was like wear your loudest Hawaiian shirt kind of thing. Or it was like come to the wedding but show up in shorts and your loudest shirt. So we get married on the beach and then we go back to this castle that has this Jamaican steel drum band. A guy from Trinidad who was a local chef did this flourless chocolate cake and we had a guy that looked like Santa Claus that did the...he was known for having the most famous Jamaican Jerk. He had a roast...he had a pig pit... So we have all this amazing food and everyone comes in and dances until sunset. Then at sunset I grab a couple of my favorite people and Lisa and we go out and walk into the ocean up to our knees smoking cigars and watching the sunset. Then everybody goes home and we are all staying in two hotels, right next to each other, so it was like one long weekend where everyone got to hang out and see each other.

The wedding was a success, everything they had hoped it to be filled with family and friends. It set the tone for their marriage and they moved on with life seamlessly. Soon, the preparation for children entered consciousness.

### **Career before Children and the Stay-at-Home Dad Agreement**

*“Three days and three days...”*

Sean and Lisa began trying to have children in 2005. Up to that point he was working corporate jobs but he felt a shift within the financial climate which allowed him to begin to think out of the box and start businesses that would free time for him to be actively involved as a stay-at-home parent.

The financial climate changes; all the sudden they can hire somebody in India for an eighth of what they are paying me. So instead of \$80 an hour they can hire somebody at \$8 hour and my job disappears. I can sort of see that coming, so I started my own business on the side, which I still have. We started with web design. I would work at the corporate place and then come home and do a couple of hours for clients to gradually build that. What we basically wanted to do was not be working corporate. She was doing hair; she had been doing hair for a number of years at this point for a top-notch salon just outside of New York. She had been there for about 15 years and had established her reputation enough that people would come as far as three states away and only go to her. She's working 3-4 days a week at the salon and I'm doing web stuff and then started doing house painting, fixing-up, faux painting. I'd come in and do minor fixes but just beautiful paint jobs on 6,000 square foot houses. Where I could go in and tape everything out, they could come back and everything would still be in place, nothing would be missing in their house and I wouldn't trash it. I would just sit there with my iPod all day so it would be quiet, there's no music blasting, just real calm, cool painting. I had a couple of cool clients at that point and Lisa and I had the sit down talk that we both wanted to participate in raising the kids.

We sat down and tried to figure it out; three days and three days. So she would work the same three days that she had at the salon and those three days I would not work and I would watch the kids for that whole day. That's what led up to it. So working out the painting and house fixing up with clients that were flexible with me because of the way that I did the work they were so happy with...that was fine...and the web work you get a couple of hours, you can do stuff. It's not contingent upon showing up at an office. All they care about is did they get their updates this week. So, between that, I would watch the girls for three days solid, but usually it was split up and it would be like Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday.

The agreement was set; three days, and three days, with the seventh day being a family day. This agreement has successfully lasted for over eight years.

### **Childhood Revisited and the Preparation for Parenting**

*“Thank you to my parents for teaching me all the lessons they had no intention of ever teaching me.”*

Sean is a contemplative man. He comes from a line of intellectual male thinkers. Every decision is methodically developed and defined before it is made. His difficult childhood and vivid observations of that time have affected how he views masculinity, his decision to become a SAHD, and how he treats his wife and children.

One of the references that I kept trying to go back to was remembering when I was a child, what worked, what didn't work; what empowered, what disempowered; what crushed the spirit, what buoyed the spirit. Trying to remember those things, with the memories going all the way back to when I was three. Noticing the differences between do as I say, not as I do and realizing the stuff that I learned most from my parents was watching who they were as people, what they did and how they did it. That taught me more than any of the words coming out of their...not that words don't matter, but if your actions aren't in alignment with the words it comes off pretty disingenuous. I remember thinking it is not fair...for some reason fair has always been...I guess when I was a little kid getting hit by this monster of a human being, I'm just like that's not fair. Somebody who can't defend themselves, that's not fair. So fairness and equality...if you want to get astrological for a moment, Libra, I'm scales. Go figure.

Sean positions his anger and focuses on his father. He talks in a tone of disbelief.

I had a functioning alcoholic as a dad who hit. So imagine somebody my size hitting somebody this size (puts his hand down low to the ground), which is unfathomable. That's what happened during those time periods, that's what people did and they didn't think much of it. Even though he was a social...that was the crime of the whole thing, the guy was a social worker that worked with troubled youth. But his first out was always to reach out and smack his kids and hit his kids.

Sean continues.

I was seeing all of the paradigms and cycles that were not working. How can I start breaking them? I knew I wasn't going to get married until my thirties because I figured it was going to take me that long to get healthy enough to be a healthy parent. I figured it was going to take me at least that long to be healthy internally to process all the stuff that happened so I wouldn't just blindly be repeating the same cycles that were broken. It was like, this is how my dad did it. Your dad is a fucking asshole, that didn't work for him

either, what are you doing? Think about the irony of being raised by a social worker who is a Director of Youth Development centers and had a Masters in Psychology and Criminology dealing with troubled youth all day long and can't fucking have a conversation with his own son. So, you're a fucking asshole. You're not being paid so you won't do it? Whatever.

Sean's tone echoes the "Never mind, dad" sentiment he shared previously. There is sadness and despair, but there is a resounding anger. He again recalls his father's ritual of a double scotch while watching the news. Sean gave up on the relationship with his dad very early in his youth. I envision Sean waiting to talk to his dad who is holding a drink in his hand, disinterested in his children, focused on the broadcast. I contemplate the family norm of waiting until the news is done to speak to him and I see young Sean being let down time and time again. As Sean pauses, I am listening to the dead air space between breaths and then Sean sarcastically states "interesting human being."

Sean continues by addressing one of the gaps within his relationship with his father. I can feel a longing for it to have been better, but the reality is highlighted by an example from his adolescence.

I look at my father as who he is and how he processes and what's of value and what's dismissive and realize that there are a great many things that I have to offer as a human being that he and I will never be able to talk about because he can't get there and he doesn't want to get there. One of the talks that I remember specifically from him was him trying to convince me that vulnerability was a weakness. And I just started laughing at him. Because I was like no you've got it wrong. It's that vulnerability and that place of genuineness, that's the only place you can come from if you want to create a rich relationship. If you're not vulnerable, the relationships you have aren't worth a shit. He saw it as weakness.

This father-son conversation happened when Sean was 17. Sean saw vulnerability as one of his greatest strengths, his dad did not. Sean believed that it would provide richness in relationships with others, his dad did not. Sean began to focus on being genuine and authentic

with those around him while his father remained stagnant, stuck in the faux masculinity of the John Wayne archetype, as he sipped his scotch.

If you go by the way I was raised, if you're the biggest, meanest guy in the room, throw your weight around to get your way. I was like what the fuck is that. Reasoning became more important. It's like we've got 2 million years of evolution. You've got gray matter? Use it. Because I'd look at the different philosophers and I'd look at all the stuff and I'd look at the people that really achieved things in the world and changed things in the world and it wasn't the people who threatened to beat others.

Sean pulls his thought into his current parenting role and demonstrates how he has used his childhood as a teaching tool for his young daughters.

We'll have conversations like that in the house where one of the girls will start to physically bully the other girl. Whoa, whoa, whoa! Do you really want to play that, whoever can throw the most people around wins? Is that what you want to play? Because I grew up in that household, that doesn't work. Being as I'm the biggest, guess who is going to get their way if I want my way. That's not how I want you guys to grow up, use your mind and reason it out.

The turbulent childhood and adolescence of Sean created an environment for deep introspection into what he wanted to become in his future. He recognized at a young age that he did not want to be like his father or his grandfather; nor did he want to follow in the footsteps of males who were popularized by Hollywood. Sean resented his father for choosing alcohol over him. He lost faith in building any relationship of substance with him. He had difficulty processing the idea of his father taking time with boys his age at work; listening to their problems and offering empathy and solutions and yet being completely unavailable to him. In one of his most poignant comments during our interviews, he discusses the disconnection between his father's work and home life. For me, as a social worker, it was hard to hear. I envisioned his father tired after many therapeutic sessions throughout the day, coming home, wanting to turn it off and decompress. I could relate; however, self-medicating through the



madness he faced came at the expense of building relationships with his family, something that I would never allow to happen.

### **Parenting Preparation with Lisa**

*Growing up it would be more important does it work or doesn't it? I don't care if it is tradition. It was like well this how our parents and our parents' friends do it. Well, it still doesn't work... That was the first noticing of just because something is a so-called tradition doesn't make it right, doesn't mean it works. Then watching the dynamics between...growing up in a household of do as I say, not do as I do. That wore thin really fast too, as far as who is a parent to try to teach anything if they're not going to live it. If you're not going to live it, isn't that the epitome of hypocrisy? As they're sitting there drinking a double Scotch and smoking saying you shouldn't drink, you shouldn't smoke. Bad for you. It's lame.*

Sean and Lisa “had nothing to really go on” as they pondered their decision to carry the parenting load together as a SAHD and SAHM. Both come from what was described as conservative Republican families with concrete definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman. Sean discusses this using his contemplative scope.

They have very staunch views as to what a guy is, and how he's represented. I used to have my dad over, specifically, just so I could cook quiche, just piss him off. But it would be so good he would be like...eh...he's dating a girl so...you know that kind of crap. So we had nothing to go on, we just knew what we wanted and who we were and how we were trying to be as people. We did a whole lot of, what if? What if we did this? What would the arc of time do as far as how that would influence another human being? What are the things that worked and didn't work in our own childhood, how we were parented? And just gather all this up and look at other people we liked...inevitably you never find anyone where you go, you know, I wish I could be like...you look at them and go well they've got a couple of things down. But, what are those couple of things? At this point, Lisa's oldest brother is 14 years older than her. So as she was coming up as a child, she was actually babysitting some of the younger kids who were only seven and 10 years younger than her. She got to see from five siblings, what that looks like. I have a brother and a sister, both of whom started having kids when they turned 22. There are four years difference between me and my sister. So it's me, my younger brother, then my younger sister, so it is two years apart, each. I got to see ok, that's how somebody raises somebody in a doublewide, that's how somebody raises somebody who is a Marine. I got nothing. I don't live in a doublewide and I'm not going the route of the military and I'm not a conservative Republican.

Sean and Lisa had many discussions outlining what worked in their lives growing up and what didn't and how to apply the positive and relinquish the negative before their children were born.

So having talks about that, well that's how we grew up in my family. It didn't work, that's one of the things that didn't work. There was no safety. People didn't make choices out of good decision-making, people made choices out of how much do I want to not get hurt, which is a whole different paradigm and lacks the creativity because you're making choices out of fear. So what would it be like to encourage the inverse of that...there needs to mutual respect, there needs to be a way for people to reason. Every thought, even when your fighting has to come from a place of you're looking for a creative resolution. There's a conflict but you're looking for a solution of some kind. It would be best if you can work it out with your brain rather than your brawn because I'm the biggest of all of you and if we go that route I'll win everything. If you hit me, what would happen if I hit you back? It would be nothing for me to throw you several yards across the room, really.

Sean goes on discussing the embedded sexism that was present in Lisa's family of origin and the impact it had on their relationship. He highlights the permeability of a social construct and the need for movement within its boundaries.

It's funny with the sexism because Lisa is the typical guy paradigm and I'm more like I want communication. She grew up with four brothers with a dad that beat them and they all got in fistfights. It's just like are you kidding me. And a bunch of them still live in places down south and in places in New Jersey that are just riddled with sexism. So she has certain paradigms of you're a guy, you're supposed to do this. I'm like what is that? No! So in breaking down those paradigms also breaking them down for what the girls (his daughters) can expect to achieve and accomplish and do or want to do within their lifetime. So going, no, that goes out the window now; those are all man-made constructs. Depending on what country you're in, there are certain countries where women are dominant. Women are the men of the country in the sense of it's a matriarchy, not a patriarchy. So basically it's all man-made constructs so what if that's just negated completely. What would it be like if there are no social barriers and there aren't any of those social constructs if you're a human being, here are your options.

Sean is a passionately engaged in the dialogue. He briefly pauses and then continues to elaborate.

I grew up in the 60s, she grew up in the 70s, and we got to see how those dynamics were just, for lack of a better word, stupid. I mean the whole sexist viewpoint if you're a male, here are your gender roles; if you're a female, here are your gender roles. Which when I first met her, she had a lot of, and it took a while to sort of get her...she wanted me to

participate but sort of had outlandish expectations that because I was a guy I should be living a certain way...or whatever. We worked all of that out before we had the kids. It's interesting because as far as emotional articulation I'm more like the traditional girl and she's (Lisa) more like the traditional guy who would rather blow it off and not talk about it, where I'm like no, that's not ok. Something happened you need to be able to process it; you need to emotionally articulate not only how you felt but also why you felt that way because it's obviously triggering other stuff. You've gotta deal with it. Everything that we don't deal with gets augmented and demonstrated in our children. I remember having talks about certain things that are like you might want to look at this honey because someday we're going to have kids and they are going to be just like us. They are going to learn by our mechanisms. We can either deal with them in a healthy manner now or they will demonstrate just how unhealthy it is because they will be living in it. It's just an inherent thing; it's just something that happens with kids. I want the emotional love and acceptance of the parents so I will emulate them in some way. They are way more perceptive than we give them credit for. They will pick up on our things, our little issues that aren't really working and be a living example of that until we deal with it.

Sean is very introspective and has done a tremendous amount of work to resolve the issues that he faced as a child. When he speaks his words are heartfelt and the tone of his voice often softens with sincerity. He truly wants his girls to be raised in a loving environment that he and his wife have consciously created.

Before we had kids I said we are either going to deal with our internal issues or we're not. If we do, we give the children the chance to start where we are now and see where they grow from that. We are going to give them the tools to deal with that. We will give them issues that they have to get over before they can deal with the world. What do you want? If you deal with your issues then they can go from this point on. If we don't then they have to heal through the same issues before they can go on to a greater potential in life. I thought how cool would it be if you could give them that. How much you've learned at this point in time and see what they do at the beginning of their life.

I think this is a very profound statement. The inner therapist inside of me gleams. I continue to be amazed by the amount of personal work Sean has done to better himself and it is quite refreshing to me.

### **The Babies**

*It's like there are so many things you start learning as a parent intuitively. You read as much as you can, you're voracious about learning and asking questions. Any kind of specialist you can*

*get your hands on and sort of interpolate, go what feels right...ok...then come to your own conclusions based on the best...between your combination of intuitiveness, personal intelligence, experiential intelligence and then actual knowledge. You sort of glean that all together and go, all right, this sort of feels right. We'll go with that. It's kind of cool to see studies come out that are kind of backing stuff up that you may have had some intuitive inkling about.*

After 41 years, Sean was going to be a father. He and Lisa fixed up the twins' room. He painted it and added a mural of ocean, birds, and tropical trees. They hung three-dimensional items on the walls to give the room dimension and shape. It felt like a "small, little island," states Sean. They added the cribs and a rocking chair. They were ready.

The twins were born around 5:30 on a beautiful autumn evening. Lisa had an emergency C-Section because one of the girls hadn't turned into position. After the surgery, they discovered that one of the girls had fluid in her lungs and was moved to the intensive care unit. Sean describes the events.

One ended up having a little bit of fluid and she went to the ICU because basically they put her on a little bit of oxygen...once they start the steps they have protocol that ties you up for the next three or four days. So in that three or four days I am sleeping in a chair that folds out in the hospital room with my wife and one girl. My wife has sutures, so we're changing the sutures, and I'm helping her to and from the bathroom. One (daughter) is in the room so I keep carrying her over to nurse and then put her back and change her constantly and then whatever colostrum she (Lisa) could pump I would take over to the other girl. She was in the...you know those little things...but you can reach through. I studied with a couple of Reiki Masters and I went and got my Reiki Mastership back in '96. So here I am just doing Reiki on the little one that's sitting in the thing and I had a little camera with me at the time so I'd call her name and hum and I have pictures of her looking over with her eyes closed, smiling. Because I'd rub her head and put my head on her belly and give her as much Reiki and feed her. Then when they started letting her come out, I'd hold her and feed her as much as I could....So, this is my four days. First four days of their life.

I imagine Sean standing over his daughter. It is evident his love and its communication to his wife and daughters are very different than anything he experienced as a child.

During the four days at the hospital, Sean would ask the nurses questions about the proper ways to care for his daughters. By the end of these four days he was “pretty confident” about how to hold, feed, and change them. He felt that he knew the nuances of each of his daughters and was looking forward to beginning their lives at home.

Lisa began nursing the twins. They believed that it made the most sense to have the girls sleep in their king size bed. Sean being 6’5” left little room for the family but he did not want to sleep in a different room so he bought a full size air mattress and put it next to the master bed. They put “little risers” on the sides of the bed for the girls. Lisa would turn from one side to the other, feeding throughout the night. Sean liked the arrangement because he could hear everybody.

There was something about being removed that I didn’t like. It was like I didn’t come this far just to have...that went right back to the male role of you sleep in the...it’s like I’m not a lawyer, I’m not doing anything that if I can’t keep my concentration anyone is going to die or go to prison. Just sleep on the air...so I slept on the air...my back was out of whack for a while. I’m glad we found a really good chiropractor when we got here and he put me back together. You know what it is like to sleep next to the little sounds they make, just the sound of them sleeping whether I can sleep or not. Just hearing the deep sleep sounds, the little coo sounds, or when they nurse and hum and eat at the same time. All of that stuff and the connection to be able to do that.

Lisa also pumped her breast milk and on the days that Sean would watch the girls he would feed it to the girls. He would thaw it from the refrigerator, get it to room temperature and feed them; a process I know so well.

Sean began doing all the food preparation, grocery shopping, and cooking after Lisa became pregnant. He worked and “became quite the chef.” Food preparation had to be enough to account for the twins. After the birth of the twins, Sean continued to carry on with his role as the primary cook and demonstrated his support for Lisa and the breastfeeding of two infants. He did

not want her to worry about anything and focused a lot of time and effort into making tasty, yet healthy meals that would provide her with the caloric intake necessary to feed twin daughters.

### **The Lived Experience**

Sean remarks that in the past when he could control his environment and dictate the course of his life. Now he admits that he has “zero control” and he is okay with it. In fact, he relishes in it. He has absolutely no desire to take on a “dictatorship” role. He believes it would stifle the creativity that is bustling inside of his children.

The only thing I have is how I am, who am I, how do I express myself? Does that create an environment I can exert influence on, but never control? It really bothers me when I have to become dictatorial. It makes me feel like shit when I get to that point. When I’m finally getting the kids to a point where I have to yell to get them to move or do something or pay attention, it’s like what is going to work for them? What will work for you? How do we need to communicate that you’re going to pay attention, you’re gonna be present and get done what needs to be done?

As the twins grew from being babies nestled on the couch, one in each of his arms, to second graders, the daily routine has evolved. Sean recalls the feeding process as babies.

It was like what I was saying before where one would finish nursing in 10 minutes and the other would lament for like 40 minutes and it is a 2-hour cycle from when they begin. So the one falls back to sleep, the 10 minute one falls back asleep and the 40 minute one finally gets off to sleep...she’s starting to get back to sleep and then the waah, waah, waah starts up again. This was for years.

He then takes a long sigh and chuckles to himself as he relives some of those moments that he pulls from his memory.

The fact that we cried when we started first grade because we were sane, we knew we were going to get sleep now, we had enough time to ourselves during the day to do a little more regarding work or anything else, and that we were still a couple, we still loved each other, we weren’t divorced and we didn’t lose everything.

The current daily routine is “all over the map.” On his days, he describes having a “little alarm” that goes off and it has the checklist of household duties he needs to complete for the day. These items range from refilling soap dispensers, to grocery shopping and cooking. Between

these household chores, he mentions that the girls spend time dressing up, use “imagination time,” and partake in “free choice” play.

Sean likes giving the twins the ability to have some control over their lives and play. He then asks me if I ever pick my children up from school.

Do you see their faces? Some of the other kids look way stressed out, like way too stressed out for their ages... Go play! Tell mom and dad to fuck off, go play! Go play for the next hour. Free choice time in your house. You need that. Not to be run around all day and then be told to go to bed. You’ll see it in their faces, how adults are not letting them have enough play and creative time to be healthy. Another study came out regarding that, they need a certain amount of playtime. The playtime is actually essential in their ability to learn.

So, for example, when Sean has an hour between school and dance, he offers the twins free time play and encourages them to use their imaginations and get lost in the art of childhood.

Sean and Lisa drop and pickup the twins from school; they do not let them ride the bus. He states that it is “bully city.” He talks about hearing “horror stories” from some of the kids. One of his daughters’ male friends was bullied enough for him to begin taking martial arts classes. Sean recognizes having the ability to avoid things like buses is a benefit from being a SAHD and he enjoys it. On dad days, he drops off and picks them up from school. If the weather is nice, they will usually stay and play on the playground. On days they have dance, they must return home earlier, eat dinner, attend dance, come back home and do homework.

On the days he works, he is in the backyard in his studio. This can be difficult at times because he has work that needs to be done, but still wants to remain accessible to his family. He doesn’t want the girls to feel they cannot approach their father. He states, “I had that when I was a kid. It was unpleasant. It was not what I wanted to have established in the house. You have to have trust and availability.”

On the weekends, particularly Saturday, Sean is home with the twins as Lisa works. They enjoy playing the Wii, the iPad, computer typing, and photography. He is teaching them how to take pictures and make movies. He is looking forward to teaching them about storyboarding and the film industry. On Sunday, they have a family day. It is the day where there is no school or work and they spend time together at home or do something like visit an art museum.

At night, the girls get ready for bed by brushing their teeth and going to the bathroom. Then, they jump into their bunk bed. Sean and Lisa are part of the ritual and make an effort to do it together. They reach over the bed and give the girls hugs and say good night, we love you, sweet dreams. This usually triggers some kind of processing moment as the girls will talk about their day. They are able to listen and communicate together as a family. And then, they say one last goodnight.

The lived experience appeared seamless and I ask Sean if it feels that way to him.

Learning all the time; sometimes I think I'm almost doing good and then other days... I was trying to describe this to Lisa the other day... it's not like I'm quite drowning but I'm sitting in the water lapping right against your mouth and nose and you're holding your head as high as you can but it's lapping right there and you're choking and you're sputtering and you're not dying and you're not going to die but the threat of it is there... but that is how it feels the majority of the time just being a parent. But apparently I'm getting really good at the exterior because Lisa is like you never seem like you're overwhelmed and I'm like, I'm overwhelmed all the time what are you talking about? I guess I'm just like well, who else is going to do it.

Sean's response is matter-of-fact. He is genuine and honest. It is comforting to hear these words because parenting can be difficult, being a SAHD is a new frontier that he is working through, another piece of his puzzle. He has reflected on his ability to recognize his place with sincerity and by doing this he becomes an even better parent who knows his strengths and weaknesses. He wants to be a dad who is present, who is accessible. He wants to give his daughters the foundation of strong values and allow them freedom to move within them. He encourages their



minds to grow and develop and pushes their imaginations to heights that will uplift them. He does this throughout the days when he is with them and at night he kisses them on the forehead wishing them sweet dreams.

### **Masculinity and Femininity**

*At the end of the night, all the stuff bubbles out of your subconscious. Can you sleep at night? If you can't, is it because of something that you did, something you said, something that's not sitting right? Who would I need to be as a human being, how would I need to be as a human being to create the environment and create a space for somebody else to step into that I would want in my life. So that's when all the stuff (gender roles) started to get thrown out the window and to a degree not really care if you're going to get some shit over it because somebody has to step up sooner or later.*

On a very cold winter's night sitting at Starbucks I ask Sean his views on masculinity and femininity. I had asked him a few weeks previously to be thinking about gender roles and how it has affected him in his life. As we settled into our seats, Sean laughs like he often does. He has another look on his face as if he is saying again, are you ready for this. He begins, "Masculinity; a bit of a limiting, cruel, societal joke." He lets out a bellowing laugh that rips through the cafe. I can't help but chuckle as well. I am curious to hear what he has to say.

Because it is! There's not enough strong, healthy male role models. There just aren't. There's more in foreign film than there is in American. Because in American film inevitably it comes down to somebody's gotta beat the hell out of somebody or somebody's gotta shoot somebody. Inevitably that's the endgame answer as opposed to you get into British, French, or Italian cinema and a gun doesn't always come into play. Sometimes it's about life. The average human being is not going to pick up a gun to solve the issue. I mean generally speaking who of us had to pick up a gun in the last three years to solve an issue. It's just not how people really live.

As Sean is talking I am reminded of him as a young boy looking to Hollywood to find role models that did not exist in the way he had hoped. The theme continues today. He has looked to the big screen for answers time and time again, but it has often failed him; however, he has found some comfort in foreign film and their portrayal of men.

Sean pauses and sits back taking a sip of his latte, cupping the glass with both hands. We are still trying to warm ourselves. He states again, “masculinity” almost as if it is a bad word. He looks around the coffee shop and continues.

Masculinity... being emotionally available, being emotionally articulate. That’s one of the huge things we are dealing with right now with this gun fetishism thing is men that are just not emotionally articulate. That’s gotta change. I really thought that was going to change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I thought we’d be done with war as a country and start moving to the next phase. I don’t know if you ever watch Bill Maher. You remember how he was talking about a bunch of conservatives, about how people are afraid of Chris Christie because he’s a rugged muscular man. I’m like he’s not rugged. He’s not muscular. He’s just a big fat boy. No! The whole concept of a conservative’s viewpoint of a man and the reality of what men are. I think that role is definitely shifting, as well it should and should have a long time ago. But for whatever reason the strong silent type... there is no strong, there is no silent type. Those are the people that drink away their demons at night kind of guys. That’s not dealing with it either. There are things that are just inherent in human beings. I don’t know if that even applies to me anymore as far as if you’re a man, you’re a man, and if you’re a woman, you’re a woman; but the bottom line is you’re a human being and human beings have the same wants and needs whether they are male or female.

Sean is becoming more animated. I think about his father and his lack of participation in Sean’s life; the strong, silent type, drinking. Sean continues to focus on the concept of human being versus a prescribed gender role.

To be heard, to have someone to listen to, to be loved, to feel love, to have someone to love. To be emotionally articulate and emotionally available. These are things that human beings need to have. The whole concept is definitely been smacked around a bit the last 10 to 20 years. I think because we are on the cusp of redefining finally what those social norms and mores are as far as gender identification and such, that you’re getting such a pushback from the conservatives because it’s just freaking them out; the whole concept of if we had equality based on who you are as a person, there’s a lot of people that would not be in the positions that they are in without persecuting or stifling other human beings around them. I think that’s the biggest argument on the conservative side at the moment is if you had to do it based on your merit, you’re fucked white boy. In the sense of just the old, doughy, white conservative Christian males. Oh, if you had to compete on every level, like really, and you had to really prove your worth compared to everybody else if color and gender were not an issue, I think a lot of those boys would not be in the positions that they are and that scares them at this moment. Because look at where women have come in the last 15 to 20 years. They’ve asked women to be more like men, harder and this and that instead of just hold your center, speak your piece, believe in what you speak. That seems more important than the societal views on what is masculine and

the societal views on what is feminine. Watch TV, watch movies, it's very apparent what is generally acceptable. And that's not good enough for me.

Sean takes another pause. It appears he is thinking about his twin daughters. He shifts the dialogue back to his personal journey.

The reason it was so important for me to do the work in my own life earlier was I wanted to be of some value as a spouse, as a parent later. If I didn't break them, I'd just continue them. Based on what I went through, I couldn't imagine doing that to another human being. That's why I was pretty ok not being a dad until 30s or 40s because if I didn't address that and deal with that I was just going to not have kids. If I couldn't have worked through that I was pretty ok with not having kids, so the cycle would end.

I am moved by Sean's words. His voice seemed to crack a bit with emotion as he talked. I think to myself, here is a man who loved his wife and daughters so much that he was willing to do all the work necessary to overcome the demons that he faced as a young child and that carried over into his adult life. I find his story heartwarming; however, I remain quiet, providing empathy without words. He continues.

In regards to masculinity I've pretty much thrown everything out the window. What does it mean to be a fully rounded human being, what does that look like? If I wanted to be genuine and authentic...you can't be a stereotype and be genuine and authentic. In regards to masculinity, I didn't have one single person that I liked enough to go that's what I'm working towards. I sort of made this internal compilation in my mind's eye of about 30 different traits in as many different people that I liked. Going ok, these 30 traits if you put them in a human being, that would be kind of cool. That would be a decent human being, that would be somebody I'd be ok hanging out with. It became important to me later on in time...in my late teens, early twenties I still had hangovers of divesting myself from my dad's version of masculinity.

Sean appears emotionally drained. The topic is one that he thinks about often. His father's influence still plays a major role deep within his psyche. Sean wanted to get to a "better place" so he could "achieve fatherhood." He grew up seeing "dysfunctional cycles" that he wanted to break before he brought children into the world because he did not want to resort to hitting like his father. Sean then stands up. "Look at my size," he states. He outstretches his

arms. He is big. I can feel the deep hurt within him. I can only imagine what he felt as a young boy standing underneath a father who wreaked of stale scotch. He states, “I was this small at one point” as he holds his right arm down low to the ground, “and if somebody like you was beating on me...” He shrugs in disgust.

We decide to switch focus and I ask him about femininity, “What are your views?” He starts,

Views on femininity; I would hope that my views are evolving. There’s still a sexist cultural hangover how we grew up and it’s constantly impressed upon us and reinforced in shows and advertising and everything else. It’s to the point now that if I’ll see a commercial I’ll sort of break it down in front of the girls, going this is what they’re trying to tell you. That’s not ok and that’s not how I want you to be and that’s not how I want our life to be. The irony of having only girls is how hard pressed I am to find decent stories with strong female characters. It’s getting better but still as far as the amounts and the differences, it’s just a toughie.

Once again the theme of positive role models is addressed by Sean only this time it is the lack of strong female characters for his girls. As he talks, I am finding it interesting that he looks to the arts, movies and literature, for the influences that he wants in his own life and the lives of his wife and daughters.

Sean is talking fast and I have to stay very present to keep up with him. He skips back to the idea of masculinity and femininity and the commonality of the human race.

Masculinity and femininity, it doesn’t matter. I don’t care if you’re a feminine guy or a masculine woman; who are you as a human being? How you express yourself? Do you express yourself? Are you repressed? As long as it is like a safe expression. Well my expression is to run around stabbing people. No, no, no. We’ve had those talks too, it’s like no, you can have your artistic expression as long as it does not mean harming other people to do it.

Then the tone of Sean’s voice softens. He pauses and begins to tell a story that his daughters faced a few days before our meeting. He talks about two girls who wanted to give one of his

daughters a make-over; only this makeover did not include makeup. These two girls held her down and took stones to make her face red and pinched her leg and scratched her face. As he is telling me this story I am visibly stunned. He says it happened at lunch. He has since met with the school principal and social worker and worked out a plan for the future. He states, “Somebody has shitty kids.” He takes a sigh, puts his arms out and sarcastically shrugs, “So, what do I think of gender roles?”

He pauses and moves to answer his own question.

I think they all need to be summarily dismissed because of the importance to move past the roles and move towards what makes a healthy human. So that’s sort of where I was going to back in my 20s and then trying to make my way through that in my 30s and 40s, just what makes for a healthy human being. That seems more important and everything else will kind of sort itself out. You’ll either be a masculine male or a feminine male or a masculine female or a feminine female. All that stuff just kind of works itself out as long as you are a healthy human being.

He continues by citing an example of when the twins were babies and he and Lisa were maintaining minute to minute. One child would be crying because she was hungry and he would think I need to feed her. Then he would move on to something else and the babies would need to be changed, so he would change them. Then he needed to prepare for the next meal, so he would do the preparation. Soon he would need to clean up, and the laundry needed to be done, so he would do it. He soon would remember the house needed to be vacuumed, so he would vacuum. He would react and do the chore regardless of it being identified as a masculine or feminine role. He continues.

In terms of masculinity and femininity, that all needs to go because that is completely cultural. When we can genuinely look at our sons and daughters and know that they will both have the same chance of achieving whatever they want to and not get shit for it every step of the way. I was talking to a girl, she was a spot welder and when she went in to the shop, the first thing the guys were saying was who hired the stripper? She was like really, I am a Union welder and you can knock that off. We’re not to a point yet where...we may see in the 2016 election a woman president but we haven’t had that yet.

Sean shifts the conversation to the 2008 presidential election. He states that he enjoyed watching young African American children dancing and jumping, rejoicing in song and dance knowing that the opportunity to become President of the United States had become a reality. He recalls his girls, who were two at the time, not knowing what was happening but picking up on the energy coming out of the television screen, dancing and jumping; He and Lisa sitting on the couch with tears in their eyes. As he is talking, I recall his words in an earlier discussion, describing himself as one who was moved by Martin Luther King and Malcom X and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the notion of fairness and equality that has guided his life.

Sean then takes a long pause and waits like he is reading a Hollywood script. He then proclaims in the sincerest tone, “I want my daughters to be afforded the same expectations that you have of your sons.” I nod my head. I agree.

As I walked out of Starbucks that cold winter’s night, my heart was warmed by our conversation. It was evident that Sean believes in the goodness of humanity. He understands he was constrained by his family’s adherence to traditional roles. He has worked to free himself from the shackles of those roles. He sees masculinity and femininity as a malleable human constructs and is more interested in human beings and not their allegiance to restrictive mores. He does not care if his daughters are defined by their culture as feminine females or masculine females; he cares only that they are happy and afforded the possibilities to create and be whatever they may choose.

### **Emotional Articulation**

*“Fearlessness in personal expression.”*

Sean often discusses a way of communication he calls “emotional articulation.” It is a way of communicating that he developed in response to growing up in a house with a

domineering male figure who would get angry, lash out, and hit. Because of this, he dreamed of the day when he would be bigger and stronger than his dad. As a youth he would say, “Someday I am going to big and I am going to kick your ass.” Until then, he would pretend to listen; fortunately, that day never came and he learned that emotional expression is more effective.

Where Sean grew up, he saw the dynamics of an unhealthy relationship between his father and mother and their children. He would watch those around him and study how they handled adversity. He knew that no matter what he did to correct the dynamics within his family of origin, he would carry some of the baggage simply by being part of it. Sean calls this “proximity osmosis.” But he vividly remembers deciding at 18 years of age that no matter how he was raised, no matter what happened to him, whatever happens in the future was his and he must take the ownership; no excuses. He states, “It doesn’t matter if I was hit all the time as a kid, if I raise my fists to somebody else, that’s me doing it. I need to take ownership.”

Sean works on his communication every day. He believes he is always working on it, even more than Lisa who he describes as often being “monosyllabic” in her communication. They have worked hard to become more emotionally articulate in a way that is instructive and purposeful with each other. He believes if this is done, it creates a vulnerability that is healthy within a relationship and leads to creative resolutions and happiness.

If something can be done about it; you have enough information to be able to do it. But also to be able to emotionally articulate it in a way that’s instructive and purposeful because there is a difference between emotionally vulnerable and emotionally volatile. I have certain relatives that are really emotionally volatile, I mean screaming off the...and then trying to have a conversation going I’m glad that you are expressing yourself but can we do this in a way that is productive. Just because you can yell about something doesn’t mean that you are emotionally vulnerable. And trying to articulate that emotional vulnerability means I want to express myself in a way that if it is something that needs to be worked out, it can be worked out. There is purpose to it. Looking for creative resolution...if there is some kind of conflict how can we come up with a creative resolution.

They have begun to teach their children these concepts and have strived to create and cultivate their expressions in an atmosphere of safety, love, and joy. He then asks, “What if you could create little pockets of energy where it’s safe for you to express who you are. It’s safe for you to emote your creative expression.” He then smiles and the theme continues to move in a hermeneutical fashion.

Telling them the reasoning behind why we don’t hit. Because we want the trust, we don’t live out of fear; we want everybody to be able to safely express themselves. Going back to expressing themselves, going back to creativity, having several pockets in the house that have their art table, they have certain play areas. We have a whole creative room called the Creative Room. They are like I’m going to go down to the Creative Room. Ok. They picked out the color purple they wanted and I painted it and set up green tables and chairs. They have all kinds of artwork down there and a whole closet full of their dress up stuff. They’ll go oh, can I play dress up for the next 20 minutes? Ok. Not having to worry about being hit, to not having to walk around paranoid that someone is going to hit you for no reason, or you’re going to get hurt for no reason because someone doesn’t like how you look or how you looked at them or they’re having a bad day and that’s their way of letting it out.

Sean describes himself as “not your typical male” presumably due to his resistance of stereotypes and cultural mores and, yet, there is no question, if needed, he would use his masculinity and become physical if something was needed in his immediate vicinity. However, it is not his first choice. Over the course of our discussions it becomes quite clear that Sean is extremely passionate about good communication, despite having the possibility to repeat a vicious cycle of physicality upon those he loved, he resisted and did the work to become a very self-aware man who is creating an environment of trust and love for his daughters who are on their way to becoming emotionally articulate.

### **Impact of Stay-at-Home Dad on His Wife**

Sean is a giver, a caretaker. He enjoys putting others’ needs first, like making a great meal for his wife and children. As Lisa and Sean’s relationship grew the division of household labor became more evident, especially during Lisa’s pregnancy. Sean began doing most of the



household chores. It became, he states, “an expectation that I would drop everything.” Partly due to the caretaking aspect of his personality and because he works from home, he now appears to be “emotionally available” to his wife and children even when he is working; however, he could be designing a web page or working on a piece of photography. This creates inner turmoil, a dilemma for Sean who wants to be available and, more often than not, if Lisa needs something he will help her and then return to his work.

Furthermore, Lisa’s job generates “three times” the income than he does. She also works out of the house. His job, on the other hand, is much more flexible and he attempts to fit in as much as possible into the three days that are identified for his work; however, sometimes due to this flexibility, he gets less time because Lisa doesn’t feel like “making a meal” or “nobody has done the dishes.”

Despite difficulty having complete control over his work, it is my impression that he enjoys having the flexibility to be more involved with Lisa and the twins. He does get satisfaction out of making the meals and doing the dishes which gives him more family time with the ones he loves most.

### **Impact of Role on His Children**

*“They (men) need to participate in raising good children on a dynamic level.”*

Sean acknowledges the societal significance of “male approval.” He states, “Because of the sexist twist on everything, there seems to be a little more energy for male acceptance than there probably should be.” By recognizing this, he believes it is important for males to make an effort to be positive role models for young children, especially girls. Sean believes it is important for “a little girl to be acknowledged, to be heard, to be seen in the world.” Therefore, he strives to have this positive influence on his daughters.

Sean believes his role as a SAHD has influenced his daughters in many ways and he relishes the littlest of things with them, for example, every morning he and Lisa have coffee and wait for the girls to step out of their room, look down the stairs, and see their mom and dad together on the sofa. He believes this provides a sense of unity and comfort for the girls. His influence is found in the “drive-by kisses” that he plants on the top of their heads as he passes by them throughout the day making them feel secure and loved. His influence is in the way he teaches them about technology and his work by giving them his outdated tablets and software. These are but a few of the things he does every day that have an impact on his daughters.

Another way Sean impacts his daughters is through his example. He believes it is important to acknowledge and share the difficulties he faced as a child with his daughters. Although he was raised differently than he is raising his girls, he finds it “very interesting” to see similar issues and internal struggles surface with his daughters that he went through at the same age. He provides empathy to his daughters by stating, “That’s what I went through when I was your age. If you’re interested, here is some of the stuff that I did that helped me.” By doing this, Sean believes it puts a “real face” on their current issues. As a child, he wanted this type of support from his father and never received it. For Sean, the ability to say, “You’re not alone; I went through that too” is a gift he can give his daughters.

Sean also wants his daughters to know that it is essential for a man to acknowledge when he is wrong and stand up for what he believes is right. He states,

I have to acknowledge when I’m wrong. I can’t be standoffish and I can’t bullshit my way through it. It’s part of the whole emotional availability and the honesty, the trust, and the love; you’ve gotta be honest. If you’re wrong, fess up to it. They have to see that.

For his personal growth, he believes he must be honest and true. If he isn't, he questions how that will influence the future. He asks, "Will I start subconsciously building a platform, a platform of bullshit from which I start stemming other opinions and theorems about the world."

The inverse, standing up for what is right, is just as important to Sean.

When you're right and you know it and you can prove it, you stand up for it even if everybody in the house is like no, no, no. It's like here, let me show you. Because they have to be able to do that too. I don't want to necessarily acquiesce. I want to acquiesce when I'm wrong. I don't want to acquiesce for keeping a modicum of peace or making someone else feel better. That creates its own issues later. For me I'm a man drowning in estrogen, if I'm right and I know I'm right and can prove I'm right, I'll try not to be a jackass about it but go ok, this really happened, here's how it went down.

Sean also believes in taking his personal conviction for what is right further by demonstrating his beliefs in front of his daughters within a public forum. He gives an example of his work with the Human Rights Campaign.

My family members, my friends, my longtime associates, so many people in the LGBT community. Doing theater for years, I was like the token straight guy, who could also sing and dance, which really made me outrageous. How does this all work? And I said I don't know but I'm making it up as I go along. Participating in the world for the things that I believe in. Standing up and showing them. How am I going to show them political activism? Writing a letter to the editor is ok, but nothing is at stake. Doing something, I'm out in the world somewhere and people go, 'You, I saw you. You were there demonstrating in the world, standing up for what I believe in, calling people on things. Being in a room and someone starts gay bashing whoa ,whoa, whoa, what are you doing? That's not ok. Or somebody being a sexist pig, I'm like whooooaaa, that's not ok. And saying something and demonstrating that.

Sean believes he is known to his daughters as a solid presence who is emotionally available. He demonstrates to them who he is and how he is throughout the day. He wants to show them his way of being, which includes the division of labor of the home. He wants them to see him clean, do the dishes, and the laundry. He wants it to be the norm in his house. He works to break down the walls of the social paradigms that confined him as a child. So, when the twins were infants, he would pack the "daddy bag" with pride and go off into the world with one

daughter in each arm prepared to change, clean, and feed them. He was not concerned with the societal reactions and eight years later he continues to provide a positive male role model figure to them.

## **Highs**

*Countless times I have experienced just little moments that are magical. They are fleeting and had I been at work I never would have seen it. Had I not participated in their life on this level, I would have missed it.*

Sean believes it is a great honor to be a SAHD and that the highs he has experienced over the course of eight years have been countless and are often found in the little things. He states, “Many, many, many little moments that would have been missed” if he was a typical working dad. He feels sadness for parents that are unable to witness their children evolve and grow on a daily basis; however, he believes that it is achievable for parents to have a paradigm shift with less focus on work and more emphasis at home and family.

Sean describes the joy of watching his children “bud” and “create magic in the world” as one of the highs that he experiences as a SAHD. As he talks, he chuckles, recalling one of the small, day-to-day moments and states, “The girls laugh like me and Lisa laugh, very loudly, very robustly. Listening to them belly laugh over stuff that they find silly is just wonderful.” He beams with pride as he remembers fondly. He continues, “The snuggles every morning; the kisses good night, every night we say good night beautiful girls. And then we both say, good night, love you, sweet dreams.”

I sense Sean could go on throughout the evening with more stories. He continues to beam with pride and happiness; however, he stops. It is getting late and it appears that some memories are better left unsaid, held in one’s heart. I understand and let the topic go.

## **Lows**

The tone shifts as Sean begins to discuss four major lows of stay-at-home parenting.

First, he reports, “Being poor.”

I hate not having disposable income. I hate having to make decisions out of economic availability, not because it is what we need or want. I hate being in that position. But we understand it is for a very limited window. It sucks being poor. It just sucks. I mean we live fairly modestly anyway, but it would be nice to go, let’s take the kids out to dinner... maybe go on a three-day trip and not have to worry about it. There’s a certain amount of economic disparity that is just taxing. Once again, it is in a limited context as far as time and we understand why we are doing it. And every time we look at who our girls are we are like... whatever. I can’t go on that crazy shopping spree and buy all the food I want at Costco. But we have enough food. We are all eating. My God, look at our children. We do that so many times, we just like oh my God, they are our children. Because you contribute a certain amount of matter but after that you’re just hoping you’re making a good influence because they are their own human being. It’s scary and joyous to watch.

As Sean speaks, my heart sinks. His words are filled with sadness and they hit deep within me, and yet, there also is a sense of pride and honor in parenting children who are turning into beautiful little human beings. I understand the sacrifice financially on a family to have a stay-at-home parent. I believe in this moment Sean feels my empathy. I pause as he pauses. We take a few breaths together. I can feel tears deep within my eyes that never surface.

The second low is his work not being taken seriously by those around him. Sean is building his business and works from home which he feels can be interpreted as a joke from others. But he does make money and it is enough to contribute and make a difference in the family’s finances. He also gets frustrated when Lisa does not take his work seriously. He believes, “If she needs to do something or wants to do something, there’s an expectation that I’ll just drop anything.” This coupled with the inability to accomplish much work on a “daddy day” can lead to the difficulty to get his work done.

I can’t really dig into a project in the studio because I can’t get them to sit long enough. That’s a low; that gets to be a drag. Sometimes there are some amazing projects that I can’t wait to dig into or there are projects that I need to complete to be able to move on to a better project. But on a Daddy day I can’t be bitter about that to the girls, they can’t feel

a sense of bitterness in any way because they are just enjoying their childhood. But it is a low.

Sean moves on to the third low, “The low of having no support” from family. His father is older and disinterested. He lives in the Northeast United States and continues to battle his own demons. He is overweight, has diabetes, continues to drink and pursue married women. Sean reports that he has not had a “real” conversation with him for thirty years. Sean’s mother was active with her granddaughters but was diagnosed with cancer when Lisa was pregnant and died a few years after their births. Without this support there is isolation but reliance upon each other has been forged in its place.

The lack of support from family leads to the fourth low which is isolation. Being a SAHD coupled with working from home places Sean in a position where he does not get out much. He admits that his interaction with other adults is “pretty miniscule.” This isolation does not provide him with enough intellectual stimulation or adult time for himself but he has learned to adapt. He states, “It isn’t such a big problem when you’re 50, but if I was 23 I’d have gone nuts by now.” Sean puts the girls’ needs before his; he states, “How quickly everything can slide or backtrack or set aside when the girls need anything; my time to the gym, my take care time, my personal maintenance. Things I would have attended to before. Right out the door.” He then shares a personal story about a father and a son which exemplifies his mindset.

This father and son built his backyard work studio. The son is a 28 year old who is very muscular and likes working out at the gym. Sean reports that he was married a few months ago and is thinking about having children. Sean recounts the dialogue.

The soon-to-be father states, ‘I’m not going to be like your guys. I’m not. I won’t stop working out once I have kids.’ Me and his dad start laughing. He’s like what? I’m like here’s how it goes, you grab your gym bag and you’re walking out the door and your kid looks up at you and says, dad would you play with me? You drop the bag right there and you go play with the child that has just requested that you play with them. Because

you're about to do something that is necessary for your mental well-being and esteem value but when a child asks you to play and you really don't have to do that because it's not...the house isn't going to fall apart if you don't go work out, income is not going to stop if you don't go work out. Things like that fall to the wayside very easily. That's one of the lows but once again you go all right, I'm on an 8 year arc and then they won't even want to talk...I'll be lucky if they talk to me. They're going to get to a point where they are going to be doing their own things and they are going to have their own friends and their own life and I'll be lucky if I get to participate in the conversation. I mean I'm not making any illusions to that, I'll be lucky if I'm one of those thousand dads that has an ongoing relationship with...I mean I'll still be emotionally present for them; it's just a matter of will they want to participate with me and do I fit in their life at a certain time point. I make no illusions.

Despite the lows that he described as a SAHD, Sean appears content in the role. As he talks I can feel the depth of his love for his daughters and wife. I can feel the gratitude for the role in his heart that is expressed through his words. Although the days get tough, isolation sets in, adult interaction fades into the sunset, the little moments with his girls never lose their brilliant shine. The sun never goes down on a SAHD.

## **Recommendations**

*Seeing the wonderment through their eyes...Setting aside the jaded. The coolest thing happened the other day. One of the girls got some sparkle paint on one of her fingers and Lisa not missing a beat said, 'I wonder if a fairy came by and smeared that on your thumb.' My daughter wrote a note that night about how she was sorry she missed the fairy and she loved the pixie dust on her thumb and please come by if you can, I would love to make friends with you or talk with you for a little bit.*

Throughout our conversations Sean willingly shares his recommendations to prospective and current SAHDs. He often mentions the importance of individual adult time, intimate time with one's partner, and family time. He states, "All of that is absolutely necessary... There are certain things that fall to the wayside as a parent." He recognizes this and the importance of not letting it happen. Sean also stresses the necessity of quality over quantity.

As a SAHD, Sean believes in the importance of individual time and recommends finding personal space within the home to get away from the role; a space where a dad may listen to

music, watch a movie, read a book or simply try to nap. Sean also recognizes the importance of eliminating the isolation.

Sometimes, you need your own quiet time. Sometimes you need to go out, go to the Art Museum and spend your own time soaking in culture, soaking in art, having your own thoughts. Private time to just go journal at a coffee house for an hour... Private time for each individual for what I call finding your center.

Sean believes it is important for each member of the family to have time alone and that parents should teach and exemplify to their children the importance of “finding their center” by creating personal quiet space to hear the thoughts buzzing in their heads and calm it down into peace.

Discovering and maintaining balance also includes time with your partner. Sean describes this time as “talking about complex issues or concepts, about life experiences, sharing experiences, or going to see a jazz show or Broadway.” He believes having adult outlets are necessary but often overlooked by SAHDs who are getting lost in the day-to-day grind. He continues, “There are certain cultural things I need as an adult just to keep my mind from turning to mush...there needs to be some balance.”

“Having children is so consumptive if you are doing it right,” states Sean. “We’ve joked about it going it’s the hardest and most rewarding thing I’ve ever done in my life.” Because of this consumptive aspect of parenting Sean recommends “a date night at least every eight weeks whether you think you need it or not, even if it’s just two hours being an adult, dressing up, smelling nice, combing your hair, shaving your face.” Sean pauses as I am chuckling aloud. Yes, I am laughing aloud and it is kind of depressing to admit the lack of adult time I have had over the past eight years; or even worse, the last time I went on a date with my wife. I mention this to Sean and he laughs. He continues.

I know, it was like that with the twins; we didn’t get out of the house. I think the first time we got out of the house by ourselves was 13 months and we could only do it for 15 minutes around the corner at a restaurant and we were freaking out 45 minutes into it. All



we could think about was not being able to hear the kids breathe or coo or are they being changed; because I know that by now so and so has taken a good dump.

I chuckle again. I don't know if it is the late hour, the emotion of the conversation, or just plain comic relief, but I am laughing with tears. Sean is laughing too, but he is able to regain his composure. He shifts focus to individual and bonding time with each child.

Special time with each child. Doesn't have to be every week; can be every couple of weeks, but I find that leads to special moments with that individual where they are thought of enough that they get to spend time by themselves with a particular parent. Make sure that each parent has some time with each child one-on-one. It makes a difference and once again it ends up creating specific memories for them that they get to carry on with later. I found it to make quite a difference and it is something that they can look forward to.

Sean, having outlined the necessity of individual, couple, and children time, stresses the importance of a family fun day. In their case, it is "Sunday Funday;" a day with no school, no work, no obligations. He states, "We'll get up and make breakfast for everybody and it's like now what?" The day is open for family bonding and fun.

Beyond time, Sean believes a family should share all the household work, the division of labor, which includes 'dishes, laundry, cooking, bath time, etc.'" By doing this, families may begin to knock down the barriers that society has set. He asks, "What do parents do?" He replies.

Everything that they need to do around the house, everything. And that's gotta be ok. It's gotta be ok if we are going to break down the issues of sexism. I would recommend that highly. Where it's not like oh well, you're a guy so you do this and oh you're a girl so you do this. It's like, do you live in the house? Yeah. Well here's the list of chores we have to take care of. Toss a coin... Here's something that I would recommend to guys-be able to watch the children by yourself with no help. It's absolutely essential. Have that kind of connection that you know what your kids need, you can prepare for it, you can personally as a guy pack up everything that's needed and be able to go for hours or days at a time and the kids are rested and fed, and well adjusted...I'd recommend that either parent can watch all of the children for days at a time to the point of where the end of that time they are still well adjusted and ok. You haven't died, they haven't died and everybody is still talking. Because it's kind of essential. The only way to be able to do that is to have enough of a connection with the children to understand what kind of foods

do they eat? How often do they eat? What are some of their personal needs? What are things that keep them interested and engaged? To be able to do that there has to be a certain personal knowledge of the parent to be able to attend to those needs.

Sean's last piece of advice is to "snuggle". He states,

I don't care if you've got boys or girls, snuggle them. Love them up. They've got to know it's ok to be held and to be loved and that men and women can express that and boys and girls can be expressive. It's gotta be ok...If we're to change anything, those paradigms got to dissolve. That's gotta be ok. Love them up just as much. What I say to my girls every night, good night beautiful girls. So that's like one of the last thoughts that they have been called beautiful girls for years. That's in their head instead of little monster. Or anything else that...it's like, the way girls are treated in society as-is they got shit coming at them from every fucking media outlet and every type of media and every type of medium. What would it be like if they had a healthy self-esteem from the beginning? Would these bullying suicides just stop because they would look at them and go, fuck you guys. Consider the source, bite me. Like I give a shit what you think. Whatever. Get off my Facebook page. So what would it be that those words? And express it. I'm always taking moments to...and they have to be genuine, they have to be authentic at the time of my appreciation for who they are, and having them in my life. Letting them know that emotionally and verbally articulating that. But from an absolute place of authenticity when it happens. Like how many kids get told that by their parents as they're growing up? I'm so glad you're mine. I'm so proud of who you are as a human being; the way that you express yourself.

## PART TWO: ANALYSIS

### **Childhood Masculinity**

Sean's relationship with his father during his childhood is critical in understanding his personal development which influenced his decision of taking on the role as a SAHD later in his life and how he currently performs within it. It is during his childhood where Sean witnessed the classic traditional male and female stereotypes that were deeply engrained within his family of origin. He decided to rebel against it as the seeds were planted at a very young age to do something atypical with his life, like become a SAHD, as compared to the men who went before him.

Sean waited until he was over 40 years old to have children. Why? Because he wanted to make sure that their upbringing would be different than his; essentially, he wanted to break a cycle that had been solidified over the past two generations. He was tired of the stereotype, the negative male archetype that permeated his childhood with the stench of stale scotch and failed promises. He was disgusted with the ghost of his grandfather walking down hallways, drink in hand with no time to share with him or his other grandchildren. He was angered by a father who returned from work and poured himself a drink; a father who would rather watch the evening news sipping scotch than spend time with his son. Sean looked for answers in cinema, in neighbors, and the larger community but found very little help. Hollywood presented John Wayne, a version of a classic male archetype, stonewalled and emotionless, communicating with a pistol rather than words which offered Sean continued frustration with a world that adhered to tradition. When he looked to his neighbors he found men more like his father than not; however, he discovered that the greater community had strong men, some African-American, who used words and emotion to convey a message of freedom and equality, two values Sean cherished, yet these men were looked down upon by many simply because of the color of their skin or the message of hope they communicated.

Sean's mother was educated and a teacher until Sean was born. She then adopted the traditional stay-at-home role along with unhappiness and sorrow. His father was the breadwinner who worked with "troubled youth." He was also the patriarch; the head and voice of the family. Sean's own teenage angst and hatred of his father bubbled and blossomed. At 13, he began working out, two hours a day, with the sole intention to become stronger, and therefore, physically beat his father. He was raised knowing that his rite of passage into adulthood would

include fighting his father and ultimately beating him if he wanted to become a man. So the strength training continued and the angst deepened as the day of reckoning hung over his head.

During this time Sean recognized that he did not hold the same beliefs as his father regarding masculinity. He understood that becoming a man did not need to include the ritualistic father-son brawl which had been passed down for generations. He began to value words and communication rather than fists. He also started to fully recognize that his mother, despite her unhappiness, was the true strength within the family. She cooked all the meals, did all the laundry, stayed home with the kids, and listened to the children. If there was anything that needed to be verbally processed the conversation went to her.

Sean described masculinity as “a limiting, cruel, societal joke.” I believe he adopted this belief in his adolescence and rebelled against its limitations. His rebellion did not need to include alcohol and drugs like many adolescents. His rebellion was to flip his parents’ mantra of “do as I say, not as I do” and actually do. He also recognized that masculinity could and should include aspects of the traditional feminine. He enjoyed taking home economics in high school and asked his mother to teach him how to do the laundry and cook. He knew these typical female tasks were necessary to be self-sufficient. It did not matter to him if they were considered male or female. But he also realized, to be a complete human being, that the emotional center of his personality should be explored and developed. So, he quietly rejected the John Wayne cinematic archetype and loudly rejected the masculinity of his father and grandfather.

Sean’s adolescence was filled with ups and downs like most. Due to the scope of the study, our interviews explored very little of his youth; however, he must have struggled with the gender role strain (Pleck, 1995) which forced him to address the incongruity of parental and societal expectations compared to his own differing characteristics and beliefs. During our

interviews, Sean did not discuss his state of mind during this time frame, but this incongruity has been demonstrated in others to result in low self-esteem (Pleck, 1995). As he matured his relationship with his father didn't get much better and was filled with many "never mind, dad" moments when his father's drink took precedence over him. He was also beaten regularly. In two very dramatic and poignant moments in our interviews Sean stood up over the top of me as I reclined in my chair and asked me to imagine someone like him standing over a child, ready to swing. In those moments his childhood anger was almost tangible. And yet, he was taught to show no emotion.

With each day and each workout within his adolescence, Sean's anxiety grew; however, one life-altering afternoon his mother asked his father to leave, which led to divorce, and the anxiety of fighting and beating him to prove his manhood quickly dissipated. Sean, needless to say, was relieved. This moment gave him the freedom to explore his masculinity without the watchful eye of a father who saw anything other than traditional masculinity as weakness.

Sean stated that it was the mother's job to instill all her fears and the father's job to instill his demons into his children. These demons must have haunted Sean throughout his youth because he was raised to believe that the biggest and meanest individual ruled. At some point in his early adolescence, amongst the turbulence, Sean awakened to the idea that reason was more important more than brawn. He began to read philosophers who advocated the way to change the world was not through violence.

When Sean was 17 years old he had a conversation with his father who was attempting to convince him that vulnerability is a weakness. Sean remembered laughing at him and thinking that he had it all wrong; he believed it is this vulnerability leading to genuineness, the authentic self, which can create a rich and rewarding relationship with another. Once again, this dialogue

was dismissed and not valued by his father. I believe this conversation was a critical moment in Sean's young life. He stood up to his father, not with his fists, but with the expression of rational thought. This moment was ultimately the right of passage Sean was looking for, opening the doors of the new masculinity that he was craving.

### **Adult Masculinity**

As Sean evolved into self-discovery and a new masculinity, he graduated high school, went to college and graduated. Soon after, he moved to New York City and worked as an assistant to a photographer who shot famous rock stars and other celebrities. At this time he also began to dabble in acting. Needless to say, it was an exciting time for Sean, but he felt like he needed to explore. Looking for this change of pace, he took a trip to Los Angeles, California, and decided to start fresh in the city of Angels. He believed it would provide the space for personal growth coupled with more opportunities for acting. He procured an agent and found a steady job that would pay the bills.

For the next few years rejection became a new theme in Sean's life. In our interviews, without giving much detail, he described having personal setbacks due to the rejection found within the Hollywood scene. Like the incongruity of not meeting the societal expectations of masculinity, Sean found his genuine personality in contrast with the superficial focus in Hollywood. He believed the community was inauthentic which created stress and anxiety. The highs and lows of getting an occasional gig contrasted with the constant rejection of others made it difficult to remain positive which was and continues to be a keystone of his personality. Despite the negativity, Sean was able to find friends and mentors who held similar beliefs and values which helped him remain positive and focused during a difficult, yet personally rewarding time of growth.

Our interviews did not explore the depth of Sean's desire to find some sort of acceptance for who he was, masked in the characters of others, as he acted. I am sure the freedom within the moments of acceptance when he was able to act, felt like a personal triumph compared to the confines of his childhood. His desire to act and ultimately explore pieces of his personality and humanness must have felt like a he had a sledgehammer breaking down the walls of a limiting masculine dogma. But those opportunities did not come as often as he would like and the frustration compounded.

After seven years in Hollywood, Sean moved to the mountains in hopes of finding another new beginning. He felt the new environment would still offer potential acting opportunities, primarily through commercials. He also took classes to become competitive in a technology industry that was just beginning to boom. He met a woman and fell in love. They were soon married, and a year later they were divorced. In another profound moment of rejection Sean found his wife cheating on him with another woman.

I am not sure how much the cheating of his wife challenged him to look at his own masculinity. Moments of doubt would have been natural to creep into his evolving psyche. Was his evolving masculinity not enough? Was he presenting as a man who was too vulnerable? Was he repeating a cycle as the mother of a father who cheated? Was he not good enough? It's hard to tell if he struggled with these demons instilled by his father and due to the limitations of the study, they were not addressed. I am also not sure if the cheating partner being a woman added more or less questions. Would Sean have challenged his own masculinity more if it would have been a man? Regardless, Sean expressed sadness and hurt over the incident.

Once again feeling like he needed a new beginning, Sean decided to return home and come full circle back to his roots. He moved in with an aunt and uncle and found a job in Manhattan working in a financial firm. It wasn't long after that he met Lisa on a blind date.

Becoming grounded in his roots meant coming face to face with his father. Now, he was truly a man who had more life experience. He was not the boy of his childhood. Sean looked at his dad as a man who continued to live an incongruent life of doing as I say not as I do. This lifestyle began to catch up to him and he became overweight and unhappy. In a heartfelt moment in our interviews, Sean stated,

I look at my father as who he is and how he processes and what's of value and what's dismissive and realize that there are a great many things that I have to offer as a human being that he and I will never be able to talk about because he can't get there and he doesn't want to get there.

Despite the clear evidence, Sean continued to try to have a relationship with his father which never blossomed.

Clearly lacking positive role models, Sean's introspection into who he wanted to become grew as his relationship with Lisa blossomed. As they prepared for marriage and children they discussed how they wanted to be as individuals, a couple, and parents. Lisa was the only daughter in her family and was raised in a home where traditional gender roles prevailed; however, being around her brothers and father she adopted many classic male communication styles and chose to be quiet and unemotional. Early in the relationship, Lisa expected Sean to fulfill many roles that were traditional and Sean resisted. They pressed each other to form new masculinity and new femininity by shattering the paradigms they adopted as children. They started to ask questions pondering what if, such as, and what if we did this? What are the things that worked and didn't work in our childhood? The discussions soon morphed into a philosophy. Sean realized that his childhood was formed by making choices out of fear. As a child, he would



ask which choice would hurt less. He described no safety in an environment that he felt stifled his creativity. Lisa expressed similar recollections. They knew their discussions were creating a good space and they were married.

The wedding took place at the beach. They invited those that were closest to them and asked them to wear their loudest Hawaiian shirts; once again, fighting tradition. Lisa's brother performed the ceremony; Sean's brother was the best man and Lisa's friend was the Bridesmaid. Sean did not mention his mother or father. In a moment within our interviews that was filled with emotional positivity, Sean recalled gathering a few of his "favorite people" at sunset and walking into the ocean, smoking cigars, laughing, and rejoicing. This time and space must have felt like a baptism, a cleansing of the soul by washing away the old and awakening the new. He was with the love of his life and his loving friends. As he turned around, his back to the ocean and walked up the shore, he was reborn.

Not long after, the rebirth continued. Sean and Lisa began trying to have children. Sean decided to quit his corporate job that felt oppressive and limiting; again announcing a familiar theme in his life. He began to think out of the box, open his own web business, and do house painting on the side. Lisa continued to work as a hair stylist and bring in a steady income yet maintain the freedom to be her own boss.

Within the home the division of labor began to solidify into roles. Sean threw traditional masculinity on its head by doing all the food preparation, grocery shopping, and household cleaning; roles that his father never performed. He found satisfaction being a human being, not a man defined and limited by societal norms. After Lisa became pregnant with twins, Sean thrived on providing a caretaking environment which would offer the best atmosphere for a healthy pregnancy and childbirth. After the birth of his daughters, he continued with the tasks that had

been defined. He cooked. He cleaned. He prepared bottles. He changed diapers, dressed the girls, and shortly after, he was a flourishing SAHD.

Sean's evolution within his gender identity that started as a young boy resisting the familial norm and evolving into the man he is today plays a critical role in understanding his desire to take on a role of SAHD and his adaptation within it. As you have witnessed, his journey was not easy but he was able to find freedom to grow and ultimately gain the confidence which is necessary to strap on a diaper bag and go out into his community with his two daughters. In a world that jokes that a man cannot handle the demands of childrearing if left alone, Sean proved that not only is it possible but one can thrive in the position.

In a very emotionally satisfying moment during our interviews Sean stated,

The reason it was so important for me to do the work in my own life earlier was I wanted to be of some value as a spouse, as a parent later. If I didn't break them, I'd just continue them. Based on what I went through, I couldn't imagine doing that to another human being.

So Sean began asking, "What does it mean to be a fully rounded human being? What does that look like?" This was the starting point for raising his daughters. He worked to provide an environment where they could thrive daily. He learned in his youth that fear, a theme that is woven like a thread through the different layers of Sean's narrative, was stifling his creativity; therefore, he wanted to give his children the autonomy to develop freely within the boundaries of the home.

Providing a safe environment, the opposite of what he experienced in his youth, started from the day his daughters were born and has continued. It has been demonstrated in simple aspects of life like asking the nurses for pointers, buying an inflatable mattress to be near his girls at night, cooking nutritious meals, and kissing the girls on their heads as he passes. He knew

that he must lead by example instead of the hypocritical ‘do as I say, not as I do’, mantra of his parents. He has led through his example by being emotionally articulate and expressive.

Sean wants his daughters to be fearless in their expression but never at the expense of another. He and Lisa are teaching the girls to stand up for their beliefs and be involved in the community. Once again, Sean is leading by example. He stated that he recognizes that just as in his youth, strong, positive role models are lacking but he also realizes that his influence can be immense in the development and life of his daughters. A daily task like picking up his daughters from school is seen as an honor and an opportunity for bonding and growth; an opportunity not many fathers enjoy. Sean does not want to have any “never mind, dad” moments with his daughters. He works hard to stay emotionally attentive and available, often at the expense of building his business but it is okay with him because providing an atmosphere that allows for them “to be heard, to have someone to listen to, to be loved, to feel love, to have someone to love.” His personal journey through the tides of childhood dysfunction, adult rejection, and ultimately, contentment and peace has set the tone for this SAHD to thrive within the role.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MATT DRAKE: MY STORY

#### **Prelude**

Over the past eight years my role has evolved as our family expanded. When I began graduate school I knew that I would have to write my story as a SAHD and six months ago I began. I anticipated that my story would flow out of me with ease and grace but each night as I sat down to write I found myself struggling to make it happen. With each fading night it became progressively harder. I have always been a private person; therefore, reflecting on my life and putting it down on paper was intimidating and daunting. As I struggled, I felt voiceless and didn't understand why. Then, one night as I lay in bed thinking I suddenly realized that I have no story; eight years ago my story faded away and was replaced with the stories of my children. My story is their story and their stories are mine. Suddenly it all made sense.

Now you will read bits and pieces of my life over the past few years. I have broken it down into various headings and although it is somewhat choppy, it will provide you some perspective into my life and the lens that has been used to write this dissertation.

#### **A Brief History of my Lived Experience as a Stay-at-Home Dad**

When I started this dissertation I wrote that my life has been a journey, a vivid portrait of intersecting puzzle pieces fitting together in unique ways to form the narrative of my life. As I reflect upon it, it becomes clear that the jigsaw puzzle was for a reason leading me to this space in time; a time when I became a stay-at-home dad. I still feel this way.

My life drastically changed with the birth of my daughter. My wife and I had been married almost eight years, and after nine months of planning it was really happening, we were

parents. We prepared to be parents as well as any other couple by attending child preparation and CPR classes at the local hospital. We met and became friends with couples who were also pregnant. We read parenting books and talked late in the evenings about what great parents we were going to be. However, we were different; I was going to be a stay-at-home dad. Now, over eight years later, and two other pregnancies resulting in my sons, I continue to be a SAHD caring for our now three children.

Growing up or even in the early years of my marriage, I never expected my identity would include being a SAHD. Honestly, I never thought much of what being a dad would mean for me at all. I tried to focus on the present moment. I identified with masculine and feminine narratives of my culture as I grew up. I was athletic and was the captain of my high school's basketball team which resulted in a scholarship to a small junior college. I was comfortable being in the locker room and talking about "guy" stuff but I also embraced feminine narratives of my culture. I knew society had cultural norms and prescribed behaviors for standards of masculinity; however, they were never a concern. I valued my own ability to determine what becoming a man meant. I learned from very positive male role models within my family who were very traditional in the expression of their masculinity yet displayed comfort in expressing emotion, even tears. This high level of ease with emotional content, the expression of empathy, and the willingness to perform traditional household feminine chores were influential components in the decision to take on my new role after my daughter was born.

Making the decision to be a SAHD was difficult for me and my wife. I was building a private practice and just beginning to have some success while my wife's income was substantially more than mine, stable, with health benefits. We both enjoyed and identified with our work yet we believed it was extremely important to have at least one parent in the home to

avoid daycare if we could. We hoped to raise our daughter ourselves and did not want someone else doing it in a daycare setting. Therefore, I was the one chosen to take on the stay-at-home role.

After three months of maternity leave it was time to make the transition. We had initially planned to keep my clinical practice as healthy as possible but I knew this would be difficult. My wife would rush home from work, and I would literally hand off our daughter like a football as I rushed out the door to see clients. I vividly remember, as if it was yesterday, the cold winter night drives to Boulder to meet clients. Those times were often very lonely and soon the reality of parenthood and the transition into our new roles began to consume our identities and my practice slowly faded away without much resistance from me. Our once thriving relationship stagnated as we were so exhausted that the only thing we could do was sit in front of the television hoping to tune out our frustrations. Our communication suffered and we became more isolated and alone in our roles. It seemed we gave all we possessed to our daughter and made little time for each other. I felt like I was losing my best friend, and I was. I cannot express the incongruence of complete sadness in my role as a husband and the elation as a father. I felt lost and soon began to perceive that my role as a SAHD was literally a no man's land and I didn't know if it was a battle I wanted to fight. As I ventured into the community I believed people would be more accepting and the stigma I perceived from the general population was disheartening but it was the deterioration of my relationship with my wife that was hardest to accept. Not too long after, I began to question my manhood and what I was doing in the role. I wondered if life would be better if I would have done things differently, such as taken a different career path. I asked myself, what would have happened if I made more money? What would have happened if I went into business? What would have happened if I had followed a more

traditional path? I struggled to discover personal meaning, my place in contemporary masculinity, and obtain some congruence with modern society. I remember feeling lost and talking on the phone with a good friend who expressed envy in my role and stated he would do it if things were different for his family. I remember doubting his words. This only added to my ambivalence within the role. At times I felt I had to prove my manliness even though I was unsure who needed the proof. I vividly remember doing hundreds of crunches and push-ups while my daughter was doing tummy time. I grew out a beard and began growing out my hair. I was doing anything and everything to make myself look like a modern day Tarzan, a biblical Sampson, a king of masculinity just to avoid the ridicule which I now believe was a byproduct of my own projection although my daughter and I would get strange stares as we walked the mall, or went to the grocery store, or even the local park. I felt as if I was always alone the days were long and the isolation was becoming overwhelming. Even when I had work, I was alone. No one was paying to hear my problems.

During that time I had tremendous empathy for my wife who was attempting to juggle everything but I had trouble expressing it to her, which was very unusual for me. I watched her struggle in the morning as she walked out the door to work wrestling with her mothering instincts. I thought back to when she was pregnant and the deep connection she felt with our daughter as she carried her for nine months. She was the happiest mother-to-be and now I heard her vocalize sadness and frustration with not being with our daughter as much as she would like. But I also heard her express satisfaction in her work and the joy it brought her. Sometimes I felt envious when she would leave for work. I wanted it to be me. I had difficulty sorting out the ambivalence we both had for our roles and to make it worse, we did not talk about it.

We soon realized we needed outside assistance. We contacted a local clinical social worker and participated in couple's therapy. Our therapist was helpful in many ways but was guided only by what she was experiencing in the sessions. Looking back on the sessions I feel I sabotaged some of the outcome. I was so checked out and my wife was very checked in. She wanted it to get better. I did too, but was unsure how and what would be the result. I had already perused the local bookstores and various websites for good information on the SAHD experience but had very little luck. There was nothing, which reinforced the island affect and allowed me to take on the role of a victim, something I had never done.

Despite my frustration I clung to two things. First, I always understood the importance of my responsibility to father and transmit values of personal strength, self-confidence, independence, and curiosity to my daughter. I reminded myself every morning of the extreme privilege of spending so much time with her. I would give her everything. Each morning as I watched my wife struggle to give our daughter a kiss and walk out the door and I continued to wrestle with my own manhood. I continued to struggle with the ambivalence and isolation which led to massive amounts of feelings of doubt. Yet, through it all, I clung to my gratefulness to my wife which has never wavered for trusting me with such an important responsibility.

Three years after the birth of my daughter the journey through fatherhood continued with the birth of our first son. His presence brought much needed balance into our lives. Another three years later, another son arrived which completed our family. Now, my wife and I are thriving in our relationship. Our communication is better yet I continue to grapple with my role. At times, I question my desire to continue to be a SAHD and I am flooded with the positive and negative memories of what often seems to be a personal social experiment. I still feel deep ambivalence for the role. I continue to question who I am and where I am going. I often question why I didn't



take a different career path. On occasion, I find myself in the victim role; however, I continually question how I am creating meaning for myself and children through this experience as a SAHD as I experience the ups and downs of stay-at-home fatherhood and I am grateful for all the wonderful, priceless moments I have had over the past eight years. I realize I have spent more hours with my daughter and sons than some men spend with their children in a lifetime.

### **My Beginning**

I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the mid 1970s. My parents were in their early to mid twenties. They met in college, fell in love, and decided to get married. My mom quit school and began working at a bank until I was born a few years later. My dad worked with his dad in a successful small business. When I was born, my parents assumed the traditional gender roles of the time and place in which they lived but they did not let the tradition define them.

I am the oldest of four children. I have very good and happy early childhood memories. I felt loved by both of my parents and they both took time with me. I felt safe. My mom is the quintessential mom. She is beautiful, kind, and caring. She taught me how to see the world and navigate through it. My dad, despite being the traditional breadwinner, spent massive amounts of time with me. He encouraged me to follow my interests, which mostly involved sports. He coached my little league teams and would practice with me at home. I can remember being small and having trouble sleeping for a period of time. For whatever reason, it was a comfort to me to rub my dad's earlobe until I fell asleep. He would spend countless hours allowing me to do this to help me find a peaceful rest.

My sister was born 18 months after me and my first brother was born exactly two years later. Around that time, my sister was diagnosed with Type I, or juvenile diabetes. She has been insulin dependent ever since. I often contemplate how difficult this must have been for my

parents; the constant worry about the well-being of one of your children. I cannot imagine the sleepless nights worrying about blood sugar levels and insulin regulation; however, this worry was never detected by me. They continued to make me feel special and important. Over the course of my life, I cannot think of a time when they were not there for me when I needed them.

My youngest brother was born about seven years after me. I can remember the day that I met him. My siblings were with my grandparents about an hour away and I stayed with my dad to attend school. That cold December morning was filled with dense fog. My dad took me with him to the hospital. I remember my mom sitting on the hospital bed. She looked angelic as she smiled at me. She gave me a hug and then introduced me to my brother. I touched his hands and held him. It was a good day. I remember feeling extra special being there. I felt like a leader. Ever since then I tried to be a good example for my siblings.

### **My Childhood**

My parents gave me the freedom to be me as a child. I had space to roam but always felt encompassed by their arms. I was a classic, stereotypical boy. I loved to ride my bike and play sports. I was also very much a type 1, people pleaser. I wanted to make those around me happy. I was a good student. I was a leader. I also remember a feeling that I carried deep in my soul, a feeling that I must do the right thing to set the example for my siblings. As I look back on my life, I see myself often making decisions that I thought would make the family proud. I felt a pressure to be the good example. I don't think this was placed on me by my parents. I believe it was more of a societal, Mormon push that influenced me up until my early twenties.

### **A Big Memory**

I often remember a time when I was a young boy lying out in the grass in my backyard. I remember looking up at the sky and feeling completely overwhelmed. The sky was so big and I

felt so small. I remember asking, what am I doing here? Life felt so strange. Why? I just looked up in the sky, almost frozen, and then I had a calm, peaceful feeling and I smiled. I am not sure how long I stayed there; it could have been minutes, it could have been hours, regardless this memory often comes back to me. Sometimes it haunts me and other times it provides peace. I still don't have an answer to the questions I had as a child. I don't think anyone does. At times I have heard my daughter asking the same questions. I don't pretend to have the answers. I tell her to treat others well and enjoy her time here.

### **Superman**

One of my earliest memories is me feeling like superman. I am five years old. I am in kindergarten. I am walking home from school with my best friend. There is a house that is set back from the street. It is mounted above rocks and disguised by oak brush. It has been deemed spooky by the neighborhood kids. It looks haunted. We had talked about exploring the property but were scared until today. We are slowly moving through the oak brush, tip-toe after tip-toe. Suddenly my friend's head hits a hornets' nest and he begins to scream. I know my mom is home and can help. I tell him I am off for help. I scream, "I'll be back!" I take off sprinting with all my might. The distance is daunting for a young boy but I know I can make it in no time. I am running as fast as I can. I can feel the *S* creeping out from under my shirt. The curl begins to take form. The cape appears. At this moment, I am superman. I am ready to take on all evil. I am the man of steel.

The archetypal symbolism of superman often rests in my soul. It sounds funny, but sometimes I pull strength from it. It doesn't hurt to have a superman wallet that creeps out at least a few times a day which reminds me that I am a man of steel who just happens to be a SAHD.

## **My Dad**

I feel very fortunate to have the positive male role models that I have had in my life, starting with the strongest male influence, my dad. My mom often tells me the story that details the genesis of the relationship with my dad. We have just arrived back to the house after my birth. It is late and I am crying in the crib. My mom is exhausted from the childbirth and is in bed with my dad. My dad gets up, lifts me out of the crib and takes me to the rocking chair. My mom can see him holding and rocking me in the moonlight. He is whispering softly, outlining all the details of our beautiful world. She smiles and peacefully fades back to sleep. A few hours later she awakens to see my dad in the same position, still whispering softly.

Over the course of my life his presence has never wavered. He has always been there for me. Yes, we do not always see eye to eye, but that has never stopped our relationship from growing. My dad made a conscious effort to find work that allowed him the freedom to put family first. Therefore, he was at all my big events, coached little league, made me a hot breakfast, drove me to school, and made an effort to be emotionally available. He was far and away the most present dad within my circle of friends. My dad is not afraid of showing his soft side and taught me to embrace the sensitive side of my personality and character. My dad taught me what it means to be a man. It is because of his example that I have put family first. It is why I am a SAHD.

## **My Wife**

My wife is the coolest person I know. Ever since I first saw her I knew I wanted to be with her. She is absolutely stunning and as cliché as it may sound, she is more beautiful within. On our first date, in a small college coffee shop, we talked for hours. I was intellectually stimulated and mesmerized. She was unlike any other girl. I knew I wanted to be with her. A

year and a half later we were married. After 16 years of marriage we continue to go strong. We continue to share the same interests and values. We still talk for endless hours. We play. We travel, now with our kids. Our relationship has thrived as we have evolved. I believe our relationship is built to last.

After we became parents our relationship went through its darkest times. Adjusting to the new roles was difficult because neither of us were truly content with them; however, we have adapted and I could not be a stay-at-home dad if it wasn't for my wife. Without her love, support, encouragement, patience, and wisdom, this arrangement would not have lasted. She is my best friend and the person who I count on the most. Her positivity, energy, and love guide us as a family.

### **The Decision**

Heather and I can go back and forth on decisions but we make big decisions quickly. We talk about it and go with our instincts. When discussing the role of stay-at-home dad it was like that; I don't remember any long, drawn out conversation when we decided I would take on the role. We valued having a parent in the home and wanted to avoid daycare. For us, it was a purely financial decision. Heather was making substantially more money than me with the added security of benefits. I was building a private practice and my income fluctuated from week to week. We needed stability; therefore, I took on the stay-at-home dad role. We had a year to plan for the role; nine months though the pregnancy, coupled with three months of maternity leave. When I looked to the parenting manuals, I could not find much regarding stay-at-home dads. I realized I would be blazing a new trail. Throughout my life I have been comfortable taking the road less traveled and looked forward to the challenge; however, I remember as the days passed after my daughter was born, I dreaded the day my wife would go back to work. I knew she

wanted to stay at home if she could but for us it was what the space and time dictated. The decision was made and the role was set.

### **Heather's First Day Back at Work**

As I stated, I dreaded the day when Heather went back to work after three months of maternity leave. I cannot recall all the details but I do remember feeling overwhelmed and scared, yet underneath it all excited. Heather and I agreed that I would bring our daughter to her office everyday around lunch so she could breastfeed her. The first day was a cold January day. I put Mattea in her car seat and got in the car and headed for Heather's work. I remember Mattea screaming in the backseat as I made the drive. It was the first time that I had been in the car with only her. I was so flustered and felt defeated. I called Heather and said, "I don't think I can do this." A piece of that feeling has never left.

Almost four years later after the birth of my son we were doing it again; three more months of maternity leave and back to work. It wasn't easier to have the person you love leave for work with tears in her eyes. I felt like such a failure at that moment and, again, a piece of that feeling has never left.

After Heather went back to work after the birth of our son, I vowed to myself that I would never do it again. I was done. Yet, Heather wanted another and I acquiesced. With our third child, it was harder than the previous two because of the vow I made to myself; remember, I did not want to do this again. I absolutely dreaded the days leading up to Heather's return to work. I had done this two times before and knew what to expect but pushed it out of my consciousness. That morning I woke up, helped get the kids bathed, went downstairs put on the coffee, made breakfast and lunch for Heather, and gathered the pumping gear. Heather came down holding our baby boy. Mattea and Roman were off from school that day and were playing

in the family room. I walked Heather to the garage. She handed me Luca and I could feel the heat in my body. I could feel the tears beginning to fall from my eyes. I tried with all I had to fight the tears and be strong. Heather started crying and said it will be okay. I told her that she should not be the one consoling me, that I should be consoling her. She opened the door and left. I fought the tears as much as I could but knew I couldn't hold them back. Mattea came over and asked what was going on. She asked if I was crying. I immediately told her that I was going to change Luca's diaper and went upstairs. I heard her tell Roman that I was sad. I am not sure why I fought the tears so much because I am man enough to cry. I just wanted to be strong. I put Luca on the changing pad and looked around for the wipes. I remembered Heather had put them in a little crate that she carried around the house with her while she was on maternity leave. I went into our room and retrieved it. It was the first time since Luca's birth that I had held the crate. It was full of things that Heather thought were important. It represented her as a mother. It was Heather at her best. The sadness overcame me. I didn't want to feel like this anymore. I literally felt like shit. This is why I did not want to have a third child. I did not want to have to do this again. After I composed myself I sent an email to my dad. This is what I sent:

*Dad,*

*Heather went back to work today and it tore me up inside. I fought the tears but could not hold them back. Mattea and Roman asked why I was crying and I struggled to respond. I don't think many men would understand what I was feeling at that moment. It is very difficult to watch the person you love most walk out the door knowing she wants to be with the kids. It is tough!*

*I don't know if anything would ever come of this, but I would like for you to keep your eyes open for potential jobs that might fit my profile. If something comes up, let me know and I will look into it.*

*Thanks.*

*Matt*

His response:

*Matt, absolutely I will keep my eyes open for you! Please send me your current resume. You have always been (since you were a little boy) a kind, caring and genuinely loving*

*person. Your sensitivity for others and their well being is an admirable and remarkable quality most men (people) do not possess. Heather loves you and knows her children are in good hands, that is very comforting for her even though she is away from them. She trusts you completely! There is a quote that I love I think will apply to your situation "in the depths of winter I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer." Time will pass and through the strength and love of you and Heather working together love will abound and together you will conquer. All my love and thanks for sharing with me it means a lot!*  
*Dad*

In the weeks after Heather went back to work I sent out a few resumes but asked myself why? I knew I would not be able to find a job that replaced Heather's income. If we both worked, the sacrifices we made to avoid daycare would have been nullified. I remember pondering what I perceived as failure and decided to swallow the pill. I then strapped on my daddy boots, put on the gloves and jumped back into the ring ready to go another round.

### **Average Day**

My days tend to echo the ones that came before them. The days as a stay-at-home dad blend together like groundhog day. I try to be present in the moment and when I am able to do that, the world opens up. I begin to see my sons and daughter in a new light. Their smiles look a little bit different than the day before, their play transforms, and their personalities grow right in front of me. But to truly be present is difficult in the midst of another commonplace day.

On a typical day I wake up around 6am, sometimes earlier. I help get the kids in the shower and tub. I make sure the Luca is content and wait until Heather is out of the shower and in a position to watch him. I then go downstairs and turn on Pandora to a radio station I created called ambient bliss, a downtempo chill eclectic mix, hoping it will send me into an enlightened state of mind. I then grind my coffee beans and brew the coffee. I decide what I will make for breakfast, which usually includes pancakes, toast, and/or oatmeal. I then make lunches for Heather and Mattea. By this time I have chugged a couple of cups of coffee and am still awaiting



enlightened bliss. I then get Heather's milk pumping gear together and do the dishes. Heather and Mattea are usually out the door by ten to eight. I then get Roman ready for preschool and change Luca's diaper and we are out of the house 8:15.

By the time I get back to the house Luca has usually fallen asleep. I hope to get an hour of free time. This free time presents me with a few decisions to make. First, I must clean up what I was unable to finish before we left. I do not like an overly messy house because it is an outward expression of the chaos that may be clouding my mind. When the house is clean my mind seems to settle. Now it is decision time; do I try to write a little? Do I try to get in a quick work out? Or, do I take a shower? This decision usually results in writing with a quick workout mixed in. Showers typically are a last resort and usually an every other day experience. Luca's nap ranges from ten minutes, and if I am lucky, sometimes I get an hour. I never know; which makes writing difficult. After Luca wakes up, I prepare his bottle and feed him. Then I play with him until I need to go and get Roman around 11:00. We usually get home around 11:30 and I make lunch and play with the two of them until nap time which is usually around 1. I then hope to get another bit of time but the nap schedules usually offset or Roman doesn't nap which gives me no time to myself. We then go and pick Mattea up from school around 3 and get home around 4. On a good weather day we spend time at the school park and then ride bikes or play soccer around the neighborhood. Heather gets home around 5:30 and then it is off to soccer practice on soccer nights. On non soccer nights I will make dinner which helps me decompress. The bedtime ritual starts around 7:30 and is typically completed by 8:30. I then clean up and talk a bit with Heather, watch television, or off to the office to write. I usually go to bed around 11 to midnight, sometimes later. Sleep is choppy and non consistent and some nights and mornings I wake up not knowing where I am. Then the ground hog day starts again.

## **Another Day...**

Let me share what my day consisted of today, President's day, when my kids were home from school and my wife had to work late, which she rarely does. Heather is awake and in the shower by 6am. Luca begins to stir a few minutes later. Mattea and Roman enter our room by 6:10 and say hello. Roman asks if it is a school day or if he has swimming lessons. He has neither. I get up and hold Luca until Heather is out of the shower. She takes Luca and I go downstairs and begin to make breakfast which consists of coffee and toast. Heather has a lunch meeting today; therefore I do not need to make lunch. I gather up her pumping gear and place it in her backpack. She leaves around 8:30. I do the dishes. I clean up the kitchen. I make a brief effort to play with the kids. I start the first load of laundry. By the end of the day I complete and fold seven loads. I put Luca down for his first nap around 9:15. During this time, I continue with the laundry and play with the kids. I also do sets of squats, lunges, bicep curls, and tricep extensions in the family room. I pay some bills and get them in the mail. By 11:30 the kids are hungry and I begin to make lunch. Luca is up by 11:00. I feed him a bottle. I get the kids their lunch. I gather up the dishes. We all play in the family room. I do a few more sets of crunches and pushups. Most of the pushup sets have the added weight of my children on my back. Luca goes down for his second nap around 1:00. I get the kids in their rooms for rest time. I come down stairs and continue with the laundry. I try to get a few bites of leftover lunch. I do the dishes and start the dishwasher. I think about writing but hear my kids upstairs. They are playing and not going to sleep. We decide to clean their rooms. We do this. We play. Luca wakes up around 2:30. I heat up the milk and feed him a bottle. We all go upstairs and play together. I fit in a few more sets of pushups. I fold and put the laundry up. I vacuum the entire house with Luca in my arms as Mattea and Roman play together. I straighten up some of the messes that have

gathered during the day. I get Luca down around 4:30 for his last nap. I start getting dinner ready. I unload the dishwasher. Luca wakes up around 5:15. By 5:30 dinner is served. Luca is hungry and I try to get in a few bites before I feed him. I feed Luca around 5:45. We play some more together. The kids dance in the family room. I do the dishes and the kids entertain Luca. We head up for bed around 7:45. The kids are in bed by 8:00. I feed Luca one last time and get him down by 8:30. I check on the kids. I come downstairs. I realize I am tired. Luca starts to cry around 8:45. I hold him and put him in his crib. He does this one other time. He looks big in his crib. Heather gets home around 9:00. We talk a bit about our days. She pumps. I run to the store to pick up a few things for week and get home around 10:00. Heather is upstairs with Luca and going to bed. I tell her I am going to write a bit. I come downstairs and clean the pumping equipment. I pour a glass of bourbon and head to the office. It is 10:49 as I write this. What a beautiful day!

## **Isolation**

Being a SAHD is isolating and often feels like a thankless job; however, the element of isolation into my life is mostly self-imposed. I am somewhat of a loner anyway, but the idea, or better said fact, of being the only male at any function during the day was hard to get used to. If I went anywhere during normal business hours during the work week I would be surrounded by moms and their children. If I went to the grocery store, I would be the only dad. I would be the only dad at the library. I would be the only dad at the park. I would be the only dad dropping off and picking up from school. I remember at one point, early on in my stay at home dad role, Heather and I thought it would be important for our daughter to have some social interaction, so I signed us up for story time at our local library. It took everything I had to get there. I did not want to be the only dad singing songs and reading stories to our children. But I went. I learned to

embrace it. I have now done it for my two oldest children and will most likely do it for our third. I find it interesting, however, during the two years (one year per child) only a handful of moms have said anything to me while I was there. When I first started going to parks I chuckled when moms would give me an evil eye, like who was I to be there. It got old, but now I embrace it. In the summer I enjoy running to the parks with the kids as they ride their bikes. I love to pull in with our entourage with sweat dripping, shirt off, and invade the space. As they sit outside on the periphery, I am engaged, hands on, playing with my kids as we run around having a blast. I find it interesting how many young kids latch on to me, begging me to play with them, wanting me to become a surrogate father. I kindly tell them I am there for my children. I have often pondered why this happens and am saddened by the lack of dads spending time with their children but I am forever grateful for the time I have with mine.

### **Masculinity**

I consider myself to be a masculine person. In many ways I am a traditional male, but then, I am not. I am just as comfortable drinking a beer while watching a game as I would be watching Tom Ford Men's Collection at New York Fashion Week. A wise man, who I looked up to as a young adult, told me to become a modern renaissance man. I contemplated the meaning of this statement in my late teens/early twenties. What he meant by that was to be well rounded. He encouraged me to broaden my worldview, be interesting, take every opportunity to learn and grow. He encouraged me to surround myself with positive influences. I have heeded his advice. So when my daughter was born, my wife and I provided her with an environment that embraced the masculine and feminine archetypes. Her room was painted both pink and brown. Her toys included dolls and balls. In fact, I vividly remember a day when Heather was still pregnant. We were in a huge sports department store. I found a small little baseball glove. I turned to Heather,

knowing that she was pregnant with a baby girl, and asked should I get this? She responded, would you if she was a boy. We bought the glove and it set the tone for our parenting style. With my sons, I have worked to provide the same atmosphere. So when my boys dress up as Disney princesses, I think it is great. My middle son has long hair and is constantly being called a girl despite his masculine features. I chuckle when I say, she happens to be a boy! I thoroughly enjoy breaking down stereotypes and communicate a message to my kids that they are loved unconditionally and forever will be.

### **My Identity**

Over the past eight years being a SAHD has become who I am. What I mean by this is that it has shaped my identity more than anything else during that time frame. It is ironic that I use to preach to my clients in therapy sessions that in order to have a successful life within a relationship with children you must put your needs first, your partners next, and then your children. I have done the exact opposite. Because of this, my needs have suffered, and at times, my relationship with my wife as well. I often lose myself and have found that I am most happy when I have balance. I have my own space. I have time with my wife. I have time with my kids. And, we have time together as a family.

### **Societal Responses**

Sometimes I chuckle at the things that are said to me when I am with the kids. This past holiday season I was at the mall getting Heather some new shoes. I was with my three kids who were having a blast spinning on the furniture in the shoe department. For whatever reason, it took longer than I anticipated to be assisted. When we finally made it up to the counter to pay, my youngest, who had been pushed a little over his limits, was tired and cranky. He started to fuss a bit, okay, maybe a lot. Out of nowhere a woman, who must have been in her 50s, came to the

rescue. She told me to hang in there and relayed the golden nugget of information that the mall had strollers I could borrow. Then she smiled and said ice cream and cookies always help. I said, thank you for the tip and laughed almost out loud. The comical expression of stereotyped assumptions does make me laugh but at the same time saddens me. She had no idea that I am a stay-at-home dad who is extremely well versed in child care. She comes from a generation of old school masculinity and traditional gender roles. But it goes even further than that for me because I actually get angry when modern society, often through the media, presents men who do care for children as comic relief, as mistake makers, as dumb asses, when that is clearly not the case. I also get just as frustrated when a man who cares for children is considered almost superhuman, even a lustful sexual object. He is simply a man who cares for his children; any man could do it, if he made an effort.

### **The Transformer Helmet**

It was a warm summer's day and, like most, we were at a park. When I go to the park, I am actively engaged with my kids as they play. I run around with them. I interact. I encourage their imagination. That summer day there were about 10 other kids at the park, all with their mothers who were underneath the trees providing shade. They were either on their phones or talking to each other. After playing for about 30 minutes, I heard a young boy, wearing a transformers helmet, around the age of 10, using language that was beyond foul. At first I thought I misheard him but the young boy said the words again. I could not believe what I was hearing. I immediately called out to the crowd around the park as I pointed down to the boy, "Who is the parent of the boy wearing the transformer helmet?" The park patrons stood in silence. I looked around and called out again, still no response. He said, "I didn't come here with my parents. I am here with them.", as he pointed to a group of people 100 yards in the distance. I

turned to the young man and said, “There are other ways to express who you are. There are other ways to be cool. You don’t need to use that kind of language. I know you can do it” He looked at me in shock. I could feel the wheels turning in his head. It was if he was saying, “Wow, someone cares about me enough to set a limit.” My kids and I continued to play and the boy ran off into the distance. Later, a few mothers on the sidelines of the park said “That was so great. We appreciate what you did. Thanks.” I appreciated the compliment, but I also thought you could have done this too. So is the life of a stay-at-home dad.

### **Best of Times and Worst of Times**

To steal from Dickens, being a stay-at-home dad brings the best of times and the worst of times. There are days where I feel I can do no wrong. I am present. I am making a difference. And then there are the days where it falls apart. I am ornery, frustrated, and feel like the isolation is too much. But on most days I feel like a rock star. That is what some of my daughter’s friends call me. I am a rock star...to my kids. I have performed so many concerts as I stand behind the kitchen counter preparing a meal or cleaning up. I look into my kids’ eyes and they look into mine. I am singing, playing air guitar, pulling my best Eddie Vedder. Sometimes they join in, sometimes they don’t. I will never forget the day they sat through the full 8:02 of Stairway to Heaven as I performed the air guitar like Jimmy Page. They looked at me in amazement. It didn’t take long for them to join in. Yes, sometimes it is the worst of times, but most of the time it is the BEST!

### **Aging**

Sometimes it is hard to believe that my thirties were primarily occupied by parenting and childrearing. In my darkest moments I often think that I have given up valuable years to advance a career, and yet, the strange thing is I have never defined myself by work. Growing up I didn’t

think much of what the future would look like for me. I knew I wanted a family and happiness but didn't know what it would entail. I often recall a critical incident in my life when I was in high school. At that time being the star basketball player was my priority. I dedicated countless hours to achieve this goal. Then, in my junior year I was injured and missed the last half of the season. This turned out to be one of the greatest learning experiences in my life. For the remainder of that year I was forced to reshape my identity without basketball. I focused more time in other areas and became more balanced and well-rounded individual. I found happiness in that space. Usually, when I am struggling it is due to imbalance in my life. During the past eight years I have attempted to apply this bit of wisdom, maintain balance, and work to not identify with the labels that may be attached to me by others.

### **Ambivalence**

I take pride in being a stay-at-home dad. I know that I am good at what I do. I know that if I had chosen a different path I would have been successful. Sometimes it is difficult to look in the mirror and see a man who is forty without much career accolades looking back at me; and other times it is easy to look in the mirror when I hold my youngest boy cheek to cheek, just as I did with the others, and he smiles looking back at me. I surround him with kisses and realize I am a lucky man.

### **Rock Star**

It was lunchtime. I made Roman and Luca sandwiches. I turned up Pandora. I sang and danced as they looked on, smiling. I continued with the show. They laughed and laughed. Next, Roman stood up and began dancing. Luca followed. The dance party lasted about 30 minutes. These moments will live in my mind forever!

I am a rock star! I am a juke box hero!



## **A Moment of Glory**

Being a SAHD is full of ups and downs. But there are moments of glory that are difficult to describe. Most often it is a feeling that overwhelms me and these feelings are typically unexpected, like a lightning bolt on a sunny day. For instance, today, it was a cold February afternoon in Colorado. I have already been to swim lessons, helped with a carpet install, played matchbox cars, and given two bottles; a version of the daily grind. My youngest is crying in his carseat as we go to pick up my oldest from school. His cries are becoming louder and I decide to brave the wind and cold, and walk up to the school to get my daughter which is much quicker than the driveline option. She is smiling when we pick her up. She is very happy about getting a perfect score in her math class. I am happy for her. We run back to the car and get buckled in. I sit in the back of the minivan and talk with the kids for a bit. Then, I move to the front and start to drive home. My daughter is reading her new library book to us. We are all engaged. The radio is playing quietly in the background. My youngest starts crying again. We have about 10 minutes before we will get home. These ten minutes can be difficult because the crying usually gets to me and provokes often intense, yet temporary anxiety. Then, I hear Stevie's voice like an angel from the clouds; landslide is on the radio. I reach to turn it up a bit. Her voice is angelic to me. I settle in. The song is in its second verse. The crying is still there, but dissipates. My daughter is still reading, but for now I only hear Stevie:

Oh, mirror in the sky, what is love?  
Can the child within my heart rise above?  
Can I sail through the changing ocean tides  
Can I handle the seasons of my life?  
Oh, I don't know.  
Well, I've been afraid of changing  
'Cause I've built my life around you  
But time makes you bolder  
Even children get older, I'm getting older too  
Yes, I'm getting older too (Nicks, 1975, track 8)

As I drive, I am overwhelmed with emotion. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes. It is a strange, happy sadness. Suddenly I realize that I have built my life with and around my children. The last eight years have been completely encompassed by them. I see them getting older and realize I am getting older. I take a breath as I have an existential epiphany. I realize that I am very much afraid of change even though I want it and am hopeful for it. It has been five years since I started graduate school and soon I will start a new chapter in my life. I look at my kids in the rear view mirror and I smile. They are beautiful. Life is beautiful.

### **Advice**

My advice for SAHDs from a SAHD:

- Realize how lucky you are.
- Make time for yourself.
- Make time with your partner.
- Vocalize your love to your partner.
- Love your kids!
- Do the little things around the house when you can.
- Do not wear a *Baby Bjorn*. You have hands, use them.
- Do not push your kids in strollers. Let them walk or carry them. It will encourage their independence and exploration of the world.
- Do not carry a diaper bag, carry a back pack and only on extended trips; otherwise do not carry anything.
- Express gratitude.
- Be the rock star your kids think you are.

## Hey Dad, Write a Dissertation

What is it like to write a dissertation as you take on the role of SAHD? Well, it is like running to a finish line that gets longer with each step. The process seems to go on forever just like the nighttime routine at the end of the day. For example, let's look at tonight. It is just past 9 pm. I am in my office after taking my son back to his bed. He is going through a phase where he wants me to lay by him to help him go to sleep. I am hoping to get into some kind of writing groove and make up for time that I do not have during the day. I can hear my four month old son crying as he is getting ready to be put down for the night by my wife. I hope he sleeps well tonight. He is not even close to sleeping through the night and having a few hours of uninterrupted sleep would be extremely advantageous for our health. And now, as I write these words I can hear my three year old son creeping down the stairs. Is this the fourth time already? He is rounding the corner and remaining unusually quiet. I see his dark brown eyes peering in... I will be back.

Okay, I am back, deep breath; patience young Skywalker—a mantra I use with my kids. As I was lying in the bed with my restless boy I had a moment of existential clarity. These moments come and go, and mostly depend on how much sleep I have had the night before. I realize, again, that I am a small player in the grand play called life, but I am a player and I have a role. I can make a difference. I can make my life mean anything I want. I think about how one day I will not be here anymore. One day my children will not have me with them. What will be my legacy? What will they remember? As I am lying there with my son, I turn to face him and release the expectation of time that I will have to write my dissertation. I choose to study his face instead. I think of John Lennon's Beautiful Boy lyric. I sing the melody in my mind. I smell his breath. I pull back his beautiful blond hair. I try to record this moment in my brain and hope to

never forget. What will be my legacy? I hope that my children remember a dad who was present, in the moment; a dad that gave his time to them with no other expectation other than enjoying the time together.

So, what is it like to write a dissertation as a SAHD? Yes, it is like running a never-ending marathon, but the space between the start and finish line is full of millions of memories that most dads do not have. I am lucky enough to get them.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

The birth of this dissertation was triggered by my personal experience of taking on the role of SAHD. After doing it for a year I decided it was time to fulfill my dream and obtain a PhD and I applied to get into a program. I felt fortunate that within my field I could explore the questions that I wanted answered. I needed to know what other dads, like myself, were experiencing by taking on the role. I wasn't looking for a fraternity of dads to hang out with; I think I just wanted to know that I wasn't alone and that everything was going to be okay.

As I stepped onto the grounds of Colorado State University I knew who I was going to study but was not sure how. I began my exploration to seek and provide answers for myself and other dads who may have taken on the role as SAHD. By the time I began my course of study, I was into the role nearly two years. That was seven years ago, which now feels like a lifetime. At that time there was a very limited amount of literature regarding the SAHD experience. There were 159,000 men who identified as SAHDs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In 2013, there were 214,000 (US Census Bureau, 2014). The limited amount of research that I could find guided my dissertation. I decided that I must do a narrative study which would explore the holistic lived experience (Lieblich et al., 1998) of the SAHD in its complexity. This was a difficult decision for me to make. Individuals who I respected cautioned that I might bite off more than I could chew. They advised me to do a quantitative study; however, I truly believed the data were telling me to find depth in the story of the SAHD. I wanted to be progressive and push boundaries that would enhance the research community's body of literature. I needed to provide answers for myself and other dads and their families. Over the past few years, as my study lingered on, I

often thought I should have taken the familiar approach but I was true to myself and took the road less traveled. I am happy I did because despite an increase in men taking on the role of SAHD the current body of research remains small. In this chapter I will compare and contrast my data with the current available literature and make recommendations for future research.

## **Genesis**

My dissertation journey started with individual discussions with my advisor, Dr. Timothy Davies. We sat in his office on a weekly basis and wrestled out the ideas in my head. His presence was invaluable as we explored the possibilities of the project. Not once did he confine the spaces that I wanted to explore. In fact, he pushed me to think big. It was an exciting time that I will always remember. As I look back into the Moleskines that collected the scribbles of our discussions I am filled with emotion and recall the dreams I had and goals I hoped to achieve. The first mention of a big question comes early in our discussions and consists of three main questions: (1) What is it like to be a SAHD? (2) What does it mean to be a SAHD? (3) What in your journey led you to be a SAHD? Those big questions were the North Star that remained bright as we drifted through the sea of ideas. Not long after I wrote the big questions, there is the first mention of narrative analysis which we knew would provide the framework of the study. We began looking into paralleling the narrative of the SAHD with Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey and/or the mythology of Iron John. I even thought about the inclusion of the masculine archetypes contained in the novel and movie *Fight Club*. Modern masculinity was changing and the SAHD role was a major part of it. As we continued to trek forward with our ideas we knew the influence of religion was a determining factor for stay-at-home moms and thought it would be interesting and enlightening to find dads as participants with different religious backgrounds. It is clear in my notebooks that we were pushing boundaries and the

limitations were disregarded. After months of contemplation the scope began to narrow and like a lightning bolt ripping through the pages of the notebooks the tone changed to the possibility of including the dads' narratives along with their partners, and children. It seemed like an interesting idea to provide a more holistic vision of the experience. As we probed further this scope became daunting and we decided to narrow the focus by spotlighting a small number of dads and tabled the idea of familial inclusion for a later project. We believed that my lived experience as a SAHD and my therapeutic background would help explore the true depth of each individual dad. We knew that if we used a holistic lens that focused on the past, present, and the potentiality of the future, our big questions exploring the lived experience of the SAHD and how he makes meaning of it would be answered. These answers would fulfill the purpose of the study.

### **The Purpose**

After exploring the literature and brainstorming endless avenues, my interpretive inquiry developed its purpose to describe and thereby better understand the lived experience of SAHDs and how they make meaning within the role.

### **The Stay-at-Home Dad Within and Without the Literature**

The US Census (2008) defines a SAHD as a father who is married with children under the age of 15 years old who has been out of work for at least one year so he can care for his children as his wife works. In my review of literature I stated this definition is not consistent with the body of academic literature and may be inhibiting the knowledge base regarding the SAHD. I continue to believe this definition is limiting. Each of the SAHDs in my study performed some type of work outside the home which challenges the definition yet may reinforce a stereotype

that men often define themselves by the work they do. Although the majority of a SAHD's time revolves around the house and the caretaking of his children, he continues to describe part of himself as a traditional working man.

The SAHD, as described in the current body of literature, is Caucasian, college educated, with a mean age range from 37 to 39 (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). He has made a choice to be a SAHD because he and his partner value a parent being home with the children (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). He is flexible in defining his masculinity but typically describes himself as following traditional masculinity norms (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). He reports lower levels of gender role strain than his traditionally working peers and is less affected by gender role socialization. He has high life and relationship satisfaction, as well as good psychological well-being (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). He feels supported by his partner, family, and close friends (Rochlen, McKelley, et al., 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008) yet often feels isolated (Zimmerman, 2000). He is dismayed by society's lack of appreciation (Merla, 2008; Zimmerman, 2000) and low social regard for his role (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). He struggles for social legitimacy and wrestles with feeling like a failure (Doucet & Merla, 2007). If he feels stigmatized it is often by stay-at-home moms (SAHM) at playgrounds and believes it is due to ignorance, religious or political beliefs, and opposing gender role belief systems (Rochlen, McKelley, et. al, 2010). Despite feeling stigma, he feels confident and reports high levels of parental efficacy (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). He understands the importance of encouragement, self-development, independence, and exploration in parenting (Rochlen, Suizzo, et al., 2008). He emphasizes traditional masculinity in his parenting by promoting risk-taking,



independence, and sports (Doucet & Merla, 2007). He distinguishes what he does from what mothers do. He is not trying to replace her (Doucet & Merla, 2007) within the family dynamic.

The SAHD, as revealed in my study, is Caucasian, educated (all but one graduated college), with an age ranging from mid 30s to late 40s. He has made the decision to be a SAHD because he and his partner value a parent being home with the children. He is extremely flexible in his masculinity and could define himself by traditional masculinity but chooses not to. He doesn't feel much gender role strain and does not appear to be affected much by gender role socialization. He simply embraces the aspects of traditional masculinity that work for him and rejects those that do not. He feels satisfied with his life, his partner, and has good psychological well being. He is supported by those close to him, his partner, his children, and friends; however, he does feel isolated. He is confused by society's lack of appreciation and low social regard. He struggles for legitimacy but does not define himself as a failure. He is often stigmatized by SAHMs around town, often at local parks. He is dismayed by the stigma he feels but is confident in his parenting skills and understands the importance of his role and how he performs it. He encourages his children to be independent and free thinkers. He distinguishes what he does from what his partner does. He is not trying to replace her. He is unique. He is a SAHD and he is blazing a new trail of masculinity.

## **Outliers**

The SAHDs in my study have some unique commonalities that need to be explored further in future research. Each dad within my study experienced some type of discomfort within their familial and communal environments. Within their families was the paternal presence of men that were emotionally unavailable. Scott's dad wrestled with his own childhood issues and

his inability to connect with his second son who was born with disabilities which led to detachment from Scott. As much as Scott wanted a relationship with his father, and still does, it wasn't reciprocated. Now, Scott makes many decisions with his children by doing what his father did not. Sean's dad hid behind glasses of scotch and was unable or simply unwilling to connect with his son. Sean waited for the day where he would be bigger and stronger than him so he could return the physical punishment he received as a boy; however, as he matured he learned that controlling and talking about anger and frustration were more effective and he fought against becoming the stereotypical male of his community and family. Steven's dad was simply quiet and aloof and never created space that was needed to grow a deep relationship. Steven knew his dad cared for him but wanted to escape the confines of his home as soon as possible.

At the communal level each dad within my study, other than myself, experienced bullying during their childhood and adolescence. This is a distinctive commonality that I discovered that is not referenced within the SAHD literature. Scott's unique childhood, which focused heavily on his brother's disability, left him alone and isolated. He was different from his peers and dreaded attending school for fear of the bullying; therefore, he retreated to his bedroom and lost himself in the fantasy world contained in the books he loved. Steven's family moved to the picturesque English countryside but its beauty was lost in the daily survival of the fittest at school. Steven learned that he was an outsider and was physically challenged. He chose to defend himself and his brother from the relentless bullying that persisted until he left home for a world that would allow him to truly find himself. Sean faced the threat of physical harm at home and was often picked on at school by his peers. He retreated into a world of film, cinema, and art.

Throughout the interviews each dad expressed concern for the potential bullying among their own children and were often in the midst of its throws in their current situations. They were

actively present and expressed a desire to put out the spark before it flamed by contacting teachers or school administrators. I believe exploring how childhood bullying impacted these men in becoming SAHDs and their parenting styles could be an interesting topic for further exploration and research.

### **Gender Role Theory and the Stay-at-Home Dad**

As evidenced within a review of the literature, gender role theory is often used as a lens to view the SAHD experience. Over thirty years ago Pleck (1995) became the leading scholar within research regarding masculinity. Over the course of his research he introduced, among other concepts, gender role discrepancy, gender role stress, and gender role conflict. Gender role discrepancy was defined as the incongruence between one's gender role expectations prescribed by society and the actual characteristics that one possesses. Gender role stress postulated that boys develop masculine schema through the social constructs of society and typically the adoption of the schema would be rewarded; however, stress could arise from an excessive commitment to and reliance upon the prescribed societal roles and the perceived failure to achieve the sanctioned norms. Gender role conflict (O'Neil, et al. 1995) was defined as a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences on the individual or others. This conflict occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of self and/or others. It is theorized that men experience gender role conflict in one of six ways:

- (1) deviate from or violate gender role norms;
- (2) try to meet or fail to meet gender role norms of masculinity;
- (3) experience discrepancies between their real self-concept and their ideal self-concept, based on gender role stereotypes;
- (4) personally devalue, restrict,

or violate themselves; (5) experience personal devaluations, restrictions, or violations from others; (6) personally devalue, restrict, or violate others because of gender role stereotypes (O'Neil 1995, p. 167).

The SAHDs in my study understand the gender role discrepancy that is inherent when a man takes on a traditionally feminine role as a stay-at-home parent. What I find interesting is each dad fulfills various stereotypical characteristics found within traditional masculine gender role expectations such as yard work yet they are not the traditional primary breadwinner. These are men that are very comfortable embracing more traditionally feminine gender roles within the household division of labor. Each dad is comfortable in the kitchen. All but one are the primary meal makers. Each dad is willing to clean the house. All but one are the primary household cleaners. Each dad is comfortable in the grocery store. All but one are the primary grocery shoppers. Yet, despite their willingness to evolve as men, they still vocalize a desire to work and possibly become the breadwinner. All of the dads within my study do some type of labor outside the home. They continue to allow their work to define a majority of who they are as men. These are dads who want to work. They desire to add to the financial bottom line. What I believe they experience is gender role discrepancy ambivalence which I define as the recognition of the incongruence of one's gender role expectations prescribed by society and the personal struggle to find a cohesive balance and acceptance for self within that role.

Gender role stress focuses on the development of the masculine schema through the social constructs of society with the adoption of the schema that is being rewarded. Each dad in my study vocalized an awareness of the gender role schema at the macro, or communal level, and the micro, familial level. As each dad evolved from a boy to man, as stated previously, they simply adopted what they liked and discarded what they did not.

Gender role conflict was defined (O'Neil, et al. 1995) as a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences on the individual or others. This conflict occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of self and/or others. It is theorized that men experience gender role conflict in one of the six ways outlined above. The dads in my study deviate from and resist meeting the gender role norms. They experience discrepancies between their real self-concept and their ideal self-concept with resistance to gender role stereotypes. They do not restrict, devalue, or violate self; however, they do experience devaluations, restrictions, and violations from others in their communities. They do not devalue or violate others but may restrict others due to gender role stereotypes such as limiting interaction with SAHMs at parks based on personal perceptions.

### **The Stay-at-Home Dad in Therapy**

The SAHD in therapy has also been addressed within the literature (Rochlen & McKelley, 2009). The transformation into becoming a SAHD can be difficult as it is highlighted in the narratives of this study. Each dad, including myself, had to learn, adapt, and ultimately become a SAHD. This process, for me, represented some of the darkest times in my life. I was not alone. Scott's story highlighted the continued difficulty to adapt with the birth of his second child. Steven's narrative featured his desire to work from home, with additional childcare, yet struggle to find balance between work and household duties. Sean's story focused on parenting twins and the inherent difficulty of caring for two. Yet, despite the difficulties each dad evolved and flourished within the role and I believe their contemplative natures influenced this adaptation. Therapy can help as well.

Rochlen and McKelley (2009) addressed working with SAHDs in a therapeutic setting and outlined the following nine clinical suggestions: (1) Check your expectations and biases, (2) Be aware of the career transition, (3) Explore social support and isolation, (4) Normalize the fear and obstacles, (5) Don't ignore the money talk, (6) provide decision-making help, (7) Consider a strength-based model, (8) Practice Gender Aware Therapy, and (9) Consider alternative treatment approaches.

Good clinicians will always check their biases and expectations as they perform the art of therapy and it is vitally important when working with SAHDs. The work of Rochlen and Mckelley (2009) describes the diversity of the gender role identity within a SAHD. My research concurs with it. The SAHD appears to be a complex man who is willing to transform a traditional identity with an evolving attitude toward gender. He simply adopts what he likes and discards what he dislikes. The clinician should allow movement and fluidity of expression by creating an atmosphere that is based on the Rogerian (1961) principles of unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathic understanding.

A clinician must be aware of the career transition (Rochlen &McKelley, 2009) and the desire to continue to work. Rochlen and Mckelley (2009) state that many SAHDs have the desire to reenter the workforce or work part-time from home after their children reach a certain age. Despite having an evolved take on masculinity, the SAHDs in my study all worked and identified with it; however, if you asked them what they do for a living, all would answer proudly that they are SAHDs. Having pride in what they do, and considering it a critical within the development of their children, is highlighted in my study. Each dad and his wife had made sacrifices for what they believed was for the good of the family. Scott put off full-time work but

continues to write for a local newspaper. Steven started and was building a tech company. Sean worked in photography. I went to school, taught adjunct classes, and wrote a dissertation.

Exploring social support and isolation (Rochlen & McKelley, 2009) is important to address within the therapeutic relationship. SAHDs report feeling this isolation and the dads within my study were no different. This isolation is often self-imposed due to societal gender role norms. SAHDs who take their children to parks and libraries during the work week are often the only males present. I have been through many different groups of “storytime” at my local library and have always been the only dad present in groups that average around 10 families; the moms within the group rarely acknowledge my presence. SAHMs tend to have playdates scheduled for the children almost on a daily basis. I have found that the SAHDs’ playdate is parkhopping with his children. He rarely seeks out the presence of other stay-at-home parents. Despite isolation, SAHDs tend to have a tremendous amount of social support amongst their families and close friends and appear to relieve their isolation by spending time with those who understand them; however, I believe discussing this isolation in therapy is critical for SAHD because days are often long and lonely and may lead to further dark days that can be suppressed if not discussed.

Normalizing fears and obstacles is recommended by Rochlen and Mckelley (2009). They suggest that for some dads the first time they hold an infant is when they hold their own. Adapting to the daily duties of caring for an infant can be difficult. The dads in my study adapted very well. Only Steven expressed some early difficulty with the transition. I often chuckle when I am changing a diaper and wonder what others may think if they were to see my doing a very atypical male duty. It may seem awkward or strange to some but the adaption to the role comes quickly. Each dad in my inquiry wants to be a great parent and has a very empathic, caring

nature with a willingness to learn. I believe these characteristics lead to a smooth transition and the parental skills he may lack are often quickly developed as the mother takes maternity leave.

The SAHDs in my study became SAHDs primarily due to financial reasons. The wife of each dad earned more than he did and they valued one parent in the home which is congruent to the body of literature regarding the decision making process for dads to stay at home. However, the dads in my study did not express any malice, concern, or frustration with their wives being the breadwinners. In fact, they enjoyed it. They had married confident, intelligent, strong women. The SAHDS in my inquiry did not define themselves by their work over the course of their careers before children and as a SAHD this belief continued; however, they wanted to work because of the desire to simply work, the ingrained need, and not for the paycheck.

If a man who is considering taking on the role of SAHD enters therapy it is vital that the clinician provide help within their decision making process and should include sessions including his partner. When my wife and I were contemplating the role I looked for literature to provide some type of guidance to no avail. A clinician should read narratives like those presented in my inquiry and share them with the families who are making the decision. The clinician should remain neutral and let the dad make the decision on his own. It will be important for the clinician to provide an atmosphere for deep introspection and realistic discussion of the pros and cons, including the potentialities and fulfillment of the role.

Rochlen and McKelley (2009) also recommend clinicians use a strength-based approach, Gender Aware Therapy, or alternative treatment approaches. I believe building upon the strengths of the dads when they are feeling the most vulnerable is a great place to begin with the addition of Gender Aware Therapy.



In addition to the suggestions listed above I have learned through my own clinical experience, coupled with the narratives of the SAHDs within my study, that these dads often want nothing more than to be heard. They want to voice their ambivalence with the role. They want to express their frustration. They want to share their elation. A clinician must let them have a voice. I believe I was able to obtain the depth and breadth of the narratives within my inquiry due to my clinical experience and my ability to listen without interruption. I simply let them be. These dads are isolated and often frustrated. A SAHD may go days without much adult interaction or discussion. These SAHDs are introspective and philosophical. They want to have depth to dialogue. They are starved for dialogue other than Sesame Street. These are men who are elated with the role. They are excited for their children and their growth. These are educated men who are in a position to explore their inner worlds. I believe they are perfect candidates for therapy that will make a difference in their lives and the lives of their partners and children. They have enough life experience to explore and enough time to implement change. They will present to treatment with an event which is often traumatic, the transition to the SAHD role, which may have created a need or desire for exploration. If so, the possibilities for growth are endless.

### **What Did I Learn**

By exploring the lived experience of the SAHDs and their meaning making process, I learned that SAHDs are very complex men who are pushing the boundaries of parenting along with their partners. They are thinking men who are introspective. They value the worth of what they are doing and take their role as seriously as a man who works on Wall Street. They have an evolving masculinity and encourage their children to think for themselves and are not confined by social norms. They pay attention and are present in the lives of their children. They encourage individuality and are content with their boys playing with cars as well as dolls and they are

happy with their girls playing with dolls as well as with footballs. They are very supportive of their partners and express that open dialogue is a key for their relational success. They have a strong group of friends who are supportive. They are men who understand that they have been handed a gift with their role, yet they know that they will, one day, return to the fulltime workforce. In the meantime, they will happily move forward carving out the new frontier on the journey of a SAHD.

### **Suggestions for Potential Stay-at-Home Dads and Those Currently Within the Role**

Over nine years ago, as I pondered what my life would be like as a SAHD, I struggled to find answers. The stories that I longed for were not there. My search would lead to frustration and added isolation. I felt like I was taking on a role with absolutely no guidance. This dissertation will provide that guidance to potential SAHDs or those who are currently within the role looking for answers.

This dissertation contains the lived experience of four men, including myself, who are blazing the new frontier within the role as SAHD. The narratives contain rich depth and breadth of what it truly means to be a SAHD and suggestions are embedded in the stories and my analysis.

Building upon the concepts of Carl Rogers (1961) and his person-centered theory, it is my belief that individuals have the unique ability for self-understanding and growth and given the proper environment individuals will self-actualize and ultimately find happiness. Rogers believed the environment for growth contained three important elements, all of which are contained in this dissertation. First, an element of genuineness, realness, or congruence must exist. The stories presented are genuine and real. They are the heartfelt transactions of men who

are being vulnerable by sharing their lived experience in its truest and purest form. Second, is acceptance, or caring, or prizing. As I interviewed each dad I strived to provide this type of atmosphere and I believe it is evident in the narratives. As a SAHD who is considering or within the role this acceptance is passed on to you. And lastly, Rogers believed in the aspect of empathic understanding. Once again, providing genuine empathy, that is not contrived, for each dad and his story was vitally important and is extended to you, the reader. Providing these three critical components communicates an atmosphere for growth and understanding without being directive and forceful. As you read these stories, it is my desire and belief that they will speak to you and provide the answers that you seek.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Based upon my interpretive inquiry, I recommend that further qualitative research is done to continue to explore the lived experience of the SAHD and his family. Because it is a relatively new construct with little exploratory research, I believe adding the narrative of his partner and children would be an invaluable addition to the knowledge base, which would assist dads who are currently within the role or those contemplating it.

I find the idea of longitudinal research, tracking the children of SAHDs, exciting and fascinating. I wonder how these children may be different than their peers. This idea must be explored.

Ultimately, my dissertation was grand and explored many components of the SAHD lived experience and this holistic viewpoint is important but it may be interesting to narrow the focus on distinctive topics such as parenting styles, stress relief, adaptation to the role,

generational and cultural differences, transitional times such as after work, and the decision to become a SAHD. I believe the possibilities are endless.

## **PART THREE**

## CHAPTER NINE

### MY QUALITATIVE EXPERIENCE

#### **Prelude**

The qualitative experience is not for the timid or the faint of heart. It is for the ambitious and restless. It is for those who want answers to big questions and are not afraid to explore the untamed wilderness which is prevalent in our world. It is a methodology that requires patience and understanding. It is a methodology that will provide answers as it seeks a truth which is out there, even if it's merely subjective.

#### **Why I Chose Qualitative Research and the Constructs Used**

Due to the lack of research that focused on the lived experience of the SAHD I decided to be true to the answers I was seeking and decided to conduct an interpretive inquiry based on the design and methods of the qualitative research. My inquiry was constructive in its framework. The ontology, or understanding of reality, of my study was relativist, meaning the realities were multiple, mental constructions that are socially and experientially based (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemology or relationship of participant and the researcher was subjectivist and transactional, a co-creation between researcher and participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), not unlike a therapeutic relationship I share with my clients. The methodology, how one knows the world and gains knowledge from it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), of my inquiry was dialectical, hermeneutical, and natural in its setting almost duplicating the therapeutic environment.

My belief that life is nothing more than creating stories that evolve and morph over time pushed me away from the realist perspective and its ontology and, therefore, opened the doors of constructivism, allowing me to explore the true lived experience of the SAHD. Within this framework there is no objective knowledge and truth is the result of what has been constructed in the mind of the individual (Schwandt, 1994). This construction is constantly adapting and shifting to fit the time and space of the present situation, meaning what is true today may not be true tomorrow. Human beings develop concepts, models, and schema to make sense of their experience which is plastic in character, which is then communicated through language and symbols. If two people experience the same event, such as a breakup in a relationship, one may relish in the freedom and express happiness while the other may wither in sadness and become depressed; ultimately, two different realities with the exact same event. This event will evolve with time and the story will change.

Constructivism progresses to social construction which shares the belief that reality is a construct that is created by a knower and advances to a group of knowers (Phipps & Vorster, 2009). The reality of the construct then becomes communal knowledge; therefore, social constructionism may be considered a development beyond constructivism because the reality moves beyond the subjective experience.

Before I began researching this narrative inquiry I believed that constructivism and social construction would be important conceptual frameworks as I sought to discover the subjective meaning a SAHD assigns to his life. I was also interested in the impact of personal, familial and communal prescriptions of traditional gender roles upon a SAHD's adaptation into the role. These conceptual frameworks were almost second nature for me as they are congruent with the paradigms that guide social work and have directed my practice as a Clinical Social Worker for

years. As a social worker I use a person-in-environment framework which explores an individual's interaction at the micro, mezzo, and macro system levels which include marital, parent-child, family, friends, neighbors, cultural subsystems, communities, and physical environments.

After contemplating the constructivist frameworks I realized that the best way to communicate what I would learn through my research was to use a narrative inquiry which is a way of understanding experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). I wanted the depth and breadth necessary which would allow the reader an understanding of the SAHD experience. I knew, based on my own experience, that the stories would be best communicated in their fullest form. Narrative inquiry's experiential ontology is transactional (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and participatory lending itself to my personal style. It encourages exploration into the various systemic levels found in the person-in-environment paradigm found within social work by addressing personal, familial, cultural, social and institutional narratives. Ultimately, this approach led to the stories I was seeking by highlighting the narratives of the participants' thinking, perception of the world, and assumptions of the human experience.

Going into my inquiry I knew I had two major advantages as a qualitative researcher seeking to understand the SAHD lived experience. First, I was a SAHD. I had a commonality. I had developed my own ethnographic experience. I knew this would lead to greater trust and understanding. I also realized, primarily through my work as a Clinical Social Worker, that the story was not mine, it was theirs. I had to let their stories develop on their own without countertransference, my opinion or entanglement with the participant, getting in the way. I was aware that I must simply listen and gently guide if needed. Secondly, I am a Clinical Social Worker and make a living creating environments of trust and understanding. I have essentially



participated in one of the most unique relationships available to human kind. I have witnessed the greatest elation and the deepest despair of the human experience. I understand the resiliency of the human spirit and its ability to evolve and adapt. I deeply understand the meaning and power of empathy and used these skills to my advantage. By doing so, the interviews or conversations with my participants were jewels that I did not want to tarnish. I would simply work to build the relationship and let them talk. And, so I did. I got out of the way and let the story evolve on its own.

I met the dads in an environment that was familiar to them like a local coffee shop or restaurant. I wanted them to be comfortable. I recorded the conversations and then transcribed. Sometimes, based on our previous conversation, I would send the dads questions to think about for our next discussion but most of the time we would simply talk. I found that they were like me. They wanted to have an adult outlet, some type of meaningful conversation and I believe they welcomed our dialogue. I started the initial inquiry by focusing on the proposal's research questions. I asked each dad to describe his lived experience and how it affects him and his family. From there the possibilities were endless and I welcomed their emergence. Before starting each interview, I would review what we had discussed previously to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity. I consciously sought an emic perspective by processing the process of what we were doing. I did not want my experience to dictate theirs. I wanted their voice to be unique. I had to work hard not to initially influence the dialogue. If they brought up something that I may have experienced as a SAHD, I may have expressed it to further develop trust. This often allowed us to go deeper in the experience adding to the inquiry's depth and breadth.

After the interviews were complete, the writing began. Because I did not want to tarnish the individual narrative, the primary purpose of my study became difficult to address. What truly was the lived experience of the SAHD and how does he make meaning of it? I often pondered, based on the principles of constructivism, if it is even possible to understand his lived experience? I did not want to taint his experience in any way. Therefore, the data analysis was an agonizing yet wonderful experience. I knew I had a duty to be true to the story and disseminate it to the community. I wanted the reader to create a personal construct and make some type of meaning of the SAHD experience. I looked into the interviews with a holistic lens by examining the past, present, and possibilities for the future. I knew that the dialogue was limited by its own space and time but that the words were real and authentic in that moment. It was a truth, if only for a brief instant in time. I looked for themes and commonalities that would express this truth and grouped them together in a way that I believed would be interesting and make sense to the reader.

Throughout the writing process, I carried on with the psychotherapist mantra of “do no harm.” Every decision I made was an answer to the question, am I doing this SAHD any harm? I respected these dads. I became close to them. I related to these dads. I was beginning to understand them. I wanted to communicate this understanding to the reader and be true to the story at the same time. I struggled with this immensely. Their narratives contained the genuineness of a friendship, often with no filters. They swore, expressed anger, frustration, happiness, and laughter. How was I going to transmit this to the reader? I wanted to communicate a holistic version of their lives and do it in such a way that the reader would like them as much as I did; however, the more I wrestled with this, the more I realized I was doing

the inquiry an injustice; and more importantly, the dads. I simply needed to communicate the data, the narrative, and leave it to the readers to create their own subjective meaning.

In finality, this experience has been one of the greatest in my life. It was filled with ups and downs; however, I found the reality that I, as a qualitative researcher, am making a difference in the lives of those dads who are contemplating or taking on a role that is changing the construct of stay-at-home parent absolutely humbling and exciting. I have always been interested in sharing in and understanding the lived experiences of others and giving voice to the creation of their meaning. That is partly why I chose to be a Clinical Social Worker and now a qualitative researcher. Therefore, being in a position to move a SAHDs subjective lived experience to paper for readers to internalize and create their own meaning, aiding in their own personal construction of the SAHD, is absolutely invigorating as a researcher. I hope it is the same for the reader.

### **What I learned**

Within qualitative research, as in life, relationships are most important and building a strong foundation is the cornerstone. I met each dad and explained my study in detail before we began. Off the record, we talked. That first meeting was the most important. Building the cornerstone of trust also involved creating an atmosphere of warmth, empathy, and compassion. If this does not come naturally, it must be developed and communicated with sincerity. If it is not communicated genuinely it will fail.

After the relationship is developed and the starting questions are addressed I suggest getting out of the way and letting the emergent possibilities develop. It is when we are married to

the research questions and the anticipated outcome that we fail. On the other hand, when we allow the story to develop on its own, the true research is being performed.

When writing the narrative, be true to the data. Like the interview process, getting out of the way and letting the story develop is critical. By reading and rereading the data, and trusting the process, the puzzle will begin to piece together. I chose to thematically piece it together in a way that I believed would be interesting for the reader. This experience is as much time consuming as it is fun. If you do not enjoy putting puzzles together, you may want to try another path. And, finally, have fun!

## CHAPTER TEN

### A LETTER TO THE STAY-AT-HOME DAD: OFF THE RECORD

Mr. Stay-at-Home Dad,

Before I started this process of writing my dissertation I was alone and isolated. I didn't go back to school until my daughter was almost two. I was a SAHD who was on his own. I was frustrated. My marriage seemed to be falling apart. I was struggling to stay above water; however, when I was alone with my daughter the world slowed down and I was happy. I was afraid if I expressed this happiness with my wife she would become upset because she wanted to have more time with her. It was difficult. We went to therapy and things began to improve. I applied to school and glimpses of adult socialization were a welcomed addition to what I was experiencing at home during the day. A few years later my son was born. His presence added balance to our lives. It was a beautiful time. I was content but continued to wrestle with glimpses of doubt that often crept into my psyche, especially late at night when I couldn't sleep. My wife wanted another child and I resisted. I did not want to watch her leave to work for a third time as I tried to hold back the tears. I didn't think I could do it, but I did. Now, he is almost two. I have been a SAHD for almost nine years and life is good. My kids are happy. They are well-adjusted and their teachers and our friends tell us that they are the most unique, positive, happy children they know. We are doing something right in this grand experiment.

So, you are not alone. You have a band of brothers right behind you. We may be silent but we are with you. Hold your head up high brother. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Embrace your differences. Be proud you are different. Express gratitude to your partner. Kiss

her. Love her. And then, go hug your kids. Hold them. Smell them. Breathe them in. I have learned life is too precious for things that do not matter.

Matt

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Postlude

September 5, 2015

It is exactly four years after I wrote the prelude for this dissertation. Things have changed since then. I am very comfortable within my role as a SAHD and my relationship with my wife is as good as it has ever been. My daughter is now almost eight years old. My oldest son is five. My youngest son is two. As I reflect on the many memories that I have being their dad I am flooded with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude. I am overjoyed with the life that my wife and I have created with our beautiful little family. Being a SAHD has not always been easy but it has been worth it.

When my daughter was very young I would sing her the song, *Catch a Falling Star*, and as I would sing in her ear, I would lift her up in the air and she would grab a small glowing star from the ceiling. Tonight, many years later, as we were getting the kids ready for bed I asked her if she remembered. I sang to her the lyrics and held her in my arms. She started humming the tune. Then, she wanted me to lift her up as she grabbed a little glow-in-the dark star from the ceiling. As she did, my heart melted! I stated, "You remember." She just smiled and hugged my tight. My girl is growing up too fast and life is a beautiful thing.

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## APPENDIX A

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: The Lived Experience of the Stay-at-Home Father

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: *Timothy Davies, PhD., Professor, School of Education*

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: *Matthew Drake, MSW, PhD. Candidate, School of Education*

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? This study seeks to gain understanding of the lived experience of the stay-at-home father. You are invited to participate because you are part of this new frontier of modern men taking on the role of the stay-at-home father.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? This study seeks to gain understanding of the lived experience of the stay-at-home father, and thereby, help those who are already in the role and those thinking of taking on the role.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? The study will primarily consist of interviews which may be conducted in your home or an agreed upon public place like a coffee shop. You will be asked to participate in 3-5 interviews which will last no longer than 90 minutes. Your total time commitment should not exceed 10 hours.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? You will be asked to participate in about 3-5 interviews that will last no longer than 90 minutes each, and to write in a journal. With your permission, the interviews will be audio taped. Our interaction will also be recorded in field texts (similar to journals) and may include some family participation. We will follow-up at all points throughout the process to make sure that we are on the same page and that you feel comfortable.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS? It is not possible to identify all potential risks in this process, but we have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? While there may be no direct benefit to you, it is anticipated your participation will impact stay-at-home fathers within the role and those currently thinking of taking on the role.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY? Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE? We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified by name in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

In order to accurately record your interview, the researchers would like your permission to tape record the interviews. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio file will be deleted.

YES      NO      I give the researchers permission to tape record my interviews

(please check Yes or No and initial here: \_\_\_\_\_)

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to participant      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Staff