

BOOK REVIEW

OUT FROM UNDER: *The Impact of Homosexual Parenting.*

A daughter's observations on gay fatherhood

Reviewer: Gerard J.M. van den Aardweg Ph.D.

To get insight into the functioning and long-term effects of gay parenting, administering non-standardized questionnaires with (most of the time) general and rather superficial questions to the gay parents themselves, or interviewing them and their children, are psychologically highly inappropriate methods. Apart from the fact that questionnaire and interview responses regarding private issues with interrogators with whom there is no bond of trust are of low validity in general, in this particular case most respondents are too much on the defensive to give trustworthy answers.

As gay parents want to prove that “our family is just normal”, their children do not want, or do not dare, to speak their mind. Such studies may therefore hold back the reality rather than bring it nearer, even give a completely distorted picture of it when the investigators are animated by the motive to use them as a means to promote their ideological agenda. As in ethology,¹ to learn the realities of gay parenting it is indispensable to collect direct observations “in the field,” i.e., descriptions of everyday life over the years in families with gay parents, observations of the behavior and interactions of these parents and children; and longitudinal observations on the emotional and personality development of the children involved.

“In-the-field” methods of data collection may vary; one variant is the reporting by outsiders who have intimately known the family under study for many years and who have seen how the children were affected (“hetero-anamnesis”); another is the description by the children from such a family themselves when as adults they look back to their childhood and adolescence.

Out from Under is an outstanding example of the latter type of “field study.” Unusually candid and unsparing, it is yet balanced by a mature attitude of mercy and reconciliation. The Canadian author, Dawn Stefanowicz, now in her mid-forties and a mother of two children, shows what realities may exist behind the facade upheld to the outside world in a family with a promiscuous gay parent. It is the history of only one case, of course we cannot automatically generalize from it, yet it contains certain

important elements which can be said to be of a more universal nature. Not surprisingly, various gay-parented persons who have reacted to Dawn's website recognize themselves and their childhood situation in some of her fundamental observations. I shall point out some of her experiences whose relevance exceeds her individual case.

Dawn had always loved her father. He, not her mother, was the central figure in her home and emotionally the domineering parent throughout her life. Her mother was distant, weak, passive, father's slave, so much absorbed by her own real and neurotic frustrations that there was hardly any affection left for her three children (Dawn, her twin brother, and a younger brother). On the contrary, she disciplined them harshly, at times even cruelly. As father determined and decided everything in her life -and he could be an attractive personality when he wanted-, Dawn logically longed for his love, for *fatherly* love, for "a father who could be depended on to protect me"². But this father role he did not or could not assume. Dawn's childhood and part of her adult life was marked by her hopeless longing for signs of paternal affection. If he may have had true fatherly feelings of love for his children, somewhere deep down in his psyche, they never quite reached the surface because all his attention was consumed by his "joy boys," everything else being completely subordinated and sacrificed to that. He had no love for his wife, did not even treat her as a comrade, but as his subservient maid and/or mother figure, "to cook, clean, dote on his every need and demand."³ Then did he love his lovers? Only if we give the word "love" a peculiar twist, for his relationships with his "steady" young friends, whom he installed in the family home for some months or a few years and who enjoyed a higher position than his wife, were characterized by his tyranny, occasional violence, and of course continuous "unfaithfulness." "Dad and his friends had numerous and anonymous sexual partners and were involved in many different kinds of sexual behavior, including group sex"⁴- often in their own home. Two of father's partners committed suicide after he dropped them. His daughter "saw this condition (of uninhibited homosexuality) as an act of betrayal that had destroyed any possibility of happiness for everyone in our family."⁵ This is the, objectively justified, complaint of many children of acting-out homosexual parents, irrespective of whether or not these are homosexually "married" or not: My father (mother) did not live in the first place for us, but for their partner(s). The affective needs of these children are basically

neglected, in one case more severely than in the other, but it seems inevitable that these children feel deeply insecure, lonely.

The consequences of this subordinating the whole household and the needs of the children to father's homosexual monomania (mother complied with all his perversions and tolerated his reshaping the house into a kind of a gay brothel) were predictable: all children manifested behavioral, emotional, and relational problems.

Dawn's is an extreme case, yes, though not so rare as it may seem. The life of most committed homosexuals revolves around one thing: homosexuality. In their self-centeredness they are often unaware of the suffering they inflict on their environment. Dawn's father complained about his own loveless childhood, his harsh and tyrannical father, his being sodomized by older relatives; he fled his parental home when he was fifteen; but it never dawned upon him that one of his own sons did exactly the same in reaction to exactly the same kind of loveless and abusing treatment *he himself* constantly meted out to him. To some extent, homosexually active fathers may be compared with heterosexually unfaithful fathers. In both cases family life is seriously damaged, but the average case of the homosexually active parent is worse because of his more intense (and more unnatural) promiscuity. But it is true that both the heterosexually unfaithful and the homosexually active father forsake their father role or are unable to identify with it (women with a lesbian lifestyle likewise are inhibited in their identification with the mother role, although some may be remarkably unaware of it as well).

Not a few marriage partners and children of gay parents will recognize Dawn's characterization of her childhood home situation: "It was all about him." This reminds of what the wife of Oscar Wilde, Constance, wrote (in 1897) after her husband had served his term in prison: "His punishment has not done him much good since it has not taught him the lesson he most needed, namely that he is not the only person in the world."⁶ These are true words that go to the heart of the matter and offer a key to understanding much that is driving the homosexual person (to elucidate this here would go too far, however).

Active homosexuals, partnered or not, tend to sexualize family life, whereas healthy family life must be desexualized, sexuality being relegated to the sphere of respected personal privacy. "Both parents routinely walked around nude in front of us. Dad, in particular, had precious little sense of boundaries and decency around us."⁷ No doubt his sexual obsession had blunted normal feelings of shame. As little

children, the twins were abused for sexual gratification of their parents; Dawn's twin brother was approached sexually by his father and he touched her sexually; and there were homosexual orgies in the house which should have been a safe and secure home to the children. When in her teens, Dawn had to accompany her father at his gay cruising ("even gay and bisexual men liked having good-looking women around them. They were used as eye-candy to attract more men"⁸). Children of course feel all this as oppressive, it violates their natural sensitivity and distorts their perception of sexuality, which they get acquainted with in its hideous forms, and indirectly, also their perception of marriage: "Promiscuity seemed to be the normal thing to me ... but it wasn't something I wanted any part of. ... I couldn't imagine ever getting married and voted never to have children at all."⁹

"What makes it so hard for a girl to grow up with a gay father is that she never gets to see him loving, honoring, or protecting the women in his life."¹⁰ In their hearts, many homosexuals of either sex detest the opposite sex (why, is not at issue here). When Dawn frequented a psychiatrist, later in her life, the "central key to (her) healing" proved "acknowledging my feminine nature."¹¹ Deeply marked by her father's neurotic hypercriticism of her person, she developed an inferiority complex with an accent on her gender identity: "I assumed and dreaded that I would have to experiment sexually to discover what my identity was. I felt uncomfortable and ambivalent in the company of female friends and ... didn't seem to live in the same world as these girls. The only time I could ever relax and be myself was in the company of a few boys who'd made it clear their interest in me was strictly platonic."¹² Homosexual parents who are emotionally central in a child's life cannot impart the *gender confidence* to it they miss themselves, and if it hadn't been for especially one supportive, respectful and encouraging young male friend, Dawn might have sled into a form of lesbianism. Here we have undeniably one of the psychological risks of gay parenting (a factor which is not to be confused with possible seduction if the gay parent is of the same sex. This seduction element may have played a role in the struggle Dawn's brother Thomas had "for years" with his sexual identity¹³).

Dawn's story shows how deeply the traumatized and mis-socialized children of parents who live a gay lifestyle can feel ashamed, isolated, not understood, and depressed. It took her many years to at least overcome the worst part of her neurosis. She makes it clear how crucial in that inner battle has been her inner reconciliation

with her father: “I had to forgive my father again and again to avoid becoming enmeshed in bitterness.”¹⁴ Exercising real inner forgiveness is highly therapeutic¹⁵ and it has apparently been Dawn’s authentic religious conversion which gave her the emotional force to pursue this habit of forgiving and to leave self-pity and rebelliousness behind. She wants to excite understanding for children who are locked up in situations like she and her brothers have been through, she wants to warn those who are responsible in our society for the dangers and hurts these children are exposed to. However, her story is not an accusation, her love for her father has the last word. It is *tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*, to understand everything (of her father) makes her pardon him. “One can see why mercy and compassion are so needed in remembering my father. He had a harder life than I in many respects”¹⁶ (at home as well as outside home). She sees his maniacal men-seeking as a reaction to rejection by his own father and older brothers, and in a general sense she is right, although I doubt if her explanation of his homosexuality as a “restless search for a father type” is technically 100% correct.¹⁷ Otherwise, her father’s whole family life is testimony that, no matter how understandable and pardonable, indulging in homosexualized affection seeking is objectively a pathogenic reaction to childhood hardships and the opposite of healing, that in fact it prolongs grief and suffering into the next generation.

This book therefore not only presents important observations for the discussion on gay parenting and adoption, but also for homosexually active people with children themselves: not to be rejected at first glance because it broaches a painful issue, but to be pondered over with the same equanimity and honesty with which it has been written.

Dawn Stefanowicz *Out From Under: The Impact of Homosexual Parenting*. Enumclaw WA: Annotation Press, 2007

¹ The study of animal behavior according to Lorenz and Tinbergen (Ruwet, 1972).

² Dawn Stefanowicz (Dawn St.), XXIII.

³ Ibid., 27.

⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁶ Ellmann, 1987, 523. These words were not written in bitterness, rather in sad resignation, for Constance’s “affection for him never ended, she would forgive everything”, as Ellmann adds.

⁷ Dawn St., 53.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁹ Ibid., 98-99.

¹⁰ Ibid., 230.

¹¹ Ibid., 229. In addition, mother had nothing to give by way of femininity encouragement or feminine example.

¹² Ibid., 98.

¹³ Ibid., 131.

¹⁴ Ibid., XVII.

¹⁵ Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2002.

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., XVI. He rather sought younger friends whom he could command. It is true that his homosexuality was a search for affection, but primarily from age-mates he felt not belonging to. In his case, too, the “attraction formula” that a homosexual looks for partners who possess features he feels wanting in can be applied (van den Aardweg, 1986). “Dad preferred dark-haired men ... tall, thin”(105, 109). Of her psychiatrist, Dawn remarks that he had “the same blue eyes and dirty blond hair (as my father), the same short statue..” (227). Father thus had the opposite physical traits as his partners. See also: “Dad said his class-mates teased him for his near-sightedness, but I think there was something more behind the ridicule than that” (62), which indicates peer-group non-belonging.

Bibliography

Ellmann, R. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987

Enright, R.D. & Fitzgibbons, R.P. *Helping Clients Forgive*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2002

Ruwet, J.R. *Introduction to Ethology: The Biology of Behaviour*. New York: International Universities Press, 1972

Van den Aardweg, G.J.M. *On the Origins and Treatment of Homosexuality*. New York: Praeger/Westport, 1986