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Family Man  
By Aaron Devor

I can still remember standing in the corner of the kitchen, looking out the window onto the back yard and driveway where I shot hoops with the local boys. I was talking on the phone with one of my best girlfriends. It was one of those old wall phones with an actual dial and separate handset attached by a curly cord. I think it was yellow. I was talking in hushed tones in case my mother came into the room. What I was saying was scary and dangerous. I was coming out to my friend. I was telling her I was a lesbian in a time when no one knew anyone who was a lesbian. It was before Stonewall and a time when kids like me got sent to mental hospitals for being gay and were given shock treatments to straighten us out.

She took it OK. We could still be friends. In fact, we still are friends. And she kept my secret as long as I needed her to. One of the first things that we talked about was how it meant that I wouldn't ever have kids, that I'd never have a family of my own. Even then it brought tears to my eyes. It seemed like a big price to pay but that's the way it was back then. You were lucky to grow up at all if you were gay. You were doing well if you had any kind of decent life where at least a few people *knew* and were OK about it. I just resigned myself to the idea that I'd never have kids or a family.

As the years went by, lots of things changed. Lesbians and gays didn't have to hide so much anymore. People like me, and eventually me, built successful and out, even mainstream, lives. Lesbians and gays had babies and built their own families. I could see it happening around me but I wasn't that kind of lesbian. I was far too butch, far too manly, to ever consider having a baby and neither I, nor the women in my life, were ready to start a family while were still young enough to do so. I grew up and into maturity getting attached to other people's kids, never having a primary relationship with any of them. When people asked, as they will do from time to time, whether I had any regrets in life, I replied that I only had one: I'd never had kids. I'd quickly explain that it wasn't that I felt that I had made any wrong choices, it was just that I couldn't bear to be a mother and regretted that I'd never had the chance to be a father.

All that has changed now. Now I'm a husband, a son-in-law, a brother, an uncle and great uncle, a (step) father, and a grandfather. (But not a son or grandson. My parents and grandparents are already gone.) Of course, my transition was pivotal, but it was a very slow pivot. All of us grew into these new roles together. We knew that the words for our relationships officially changed with my gender documentation but the actual relationships each moved at their own pace.

My father-in-law was probably the fastest--pretty much instantaneous. My wife, Lynn, and I had been married by our rabbi in a same-sex wedding at our home several years before and we'd already been together for more than a decade at that point. Lynn's parents had been accepting but never entirely comfortable with our same-sex relationship. When I sat down with my father-in-law to tell him that I was going to transition, tears came to his eyes (the only time I've ever seen him weep) and he gave me his blessings. According to Lynn, his behaviour around us changed immediately, as soon as we joined her and her mother for dinner in the next room. Before, he had mostly addressed his comments on business, politics, fishing, the environment, etc. to his eldest and most intellectual child, my wife, Lynn. As soon as he had another man in the room, Lynn felt that she had been shunted aside. He wanted to talk man to man. For a few years the womenfolk were relegated to spectators on most subjects but now things have evened out more.

Over the years since then we have gradually grown into that father/son relationship. My own dad had been gone for more than thirty years so I had a gap that wanted filling. He has two sons of his own but they live far, and farther, away and we live close enough to see the folks often. In recent years that has become most weeks for me, and most days for my wife. My father-in-law has taken me under his wing in a gentle and kindly way, passing on his wisdom and a few of his treasured possessions. As he has lost some mobility with age he has begun to accept a little help from me. I think most importantly for me, as an otherwise fatherless (and motherless) son, he has taken fatherly pride in my accomplishments. I've come to feel that I do, again, have a father who cares about me, supports me in my dreams, cheers me in my successes, and trusts me with his first-born child, on whom he now depends for so much. It means a lot to me to feel that I have his respect and caring. I feel that I am a son for the first time in my life, and it feels right and good. I try to do my part without usurping those born to the role.

My only and older brother lives quite far away and we only see each other about once a year. He has probably been the slowest to come to a new relationship with me. After all, he grew up and has had many decades with me as his little sister. From my perspective, a lot about our relationship had been brother-like all along but I doubt that he's seen it that way. He was supportive of my transition from the start. When I told him I was changing, the first thing he said was "Well, just make sure that you do it safe."

He learned pretty quickly to use my correct name. Pronouns took a lot longer, and he still slips sometimes. It was over a decade before I heard him comfortably introduce me to someone as his brother. I never pushed on him. I just waited for him to change his way of talking about me. After all, he had a lifetime of habits to unlearn. Language, while important, is only a small part of our relationship. What is far more important is that we have become closer with the passing of the years. We're comfortable with each other. We want to spend time together, and it is easy and warm when we do.

Would that have happened simply with the passage of time? Who knows? Certainly we did a lot of relationship healing after our mother (and last parent) died and we realized that if we didn't care for each other we'd have no reason to ever see each other again. I feel like we've both come to understand better what is important in life; family is very high on both of our lists. However I also know that "When you conclude the war in your own head, you are free to make peace with the rest of the world."<sup>1</sup> Having found peace in my head and heart, I think that I have become easier to be around. I think that he, too, has mellowed with age. We both feel the need for each other much more these days. I feel blessed to have the love of my brother.

My brother has two sons. Both were pretty much grown by the time I transitioned. As far as I could tell, we all just moved into our new relationships seamlessly. I suspect that I never made much sense to them as a female anyway and it was just easier when I finally got it right. One of my nephews has married and they have a brand new daughter. To her, I will always have been great-uncle Aaron. I suppose that one day she'll want to ask some questions. I imagine that by the time that happens, the fact that I am trans will just be a mundane detail of an old man's biography and of pretty minimal interest to a young girl.

Being a father is something that I thought that I had missed out on for sure. By the time Lynn and I got together, her son was already grown and her tubes were tied. She'd had him early in life and he'd been raised by his father and step-mom. When I came into Lynn's life, her son had recently graduated high school and had come to live with his mom in the big city. Sadly, he also came with a serious drinking

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Rosemary Jones. <http://www.transconference.org.au/invited-speakers.html>. Accessed 23 May 2013.

problem which persisted and progressed over the next decade. When Lynn moved in with me, her son stayed in the same city as us and moved on with the kind of chaotic and self-destructive life that alcoholism brings with it. We worried about him and rescued him from self-inflicted danger or injury far too many times. We tried everything we could to convince him that he was on a suicidal course. Finally we refused him access to us when he was drunk—which was most of the time—and anxiously awaited the next late-night call from the hospital or police. I was there, sharing the crisis and drama but still as his mother's partner, not any kind of father.

I think that started to change when he phoned one day, drunk and sick again, asking to come over. We relented and let him sleep it off on the couch. He slept for days. I'll never forget the afternoon that he finally got off the couch and was trying to drink some juice at the kitchen counter. I say trying because his hands were shaking so hard that it was not working very well. That was when he asked us what day it was. When we told him and he realized that he'd been out for three days, he finally said "If I don't stop drinking it's going to kill me." Of course, we'd been telling him that for years and he'd been denying that he had a problem.

He didn't leave our home for a year after that. We made a room for him and fed him and I paid many of his living expenses while he got clean. (In the fifteen years since that day, he's never taken another drink.) We didn't talk deeply during that year, mostly just day-to-day things, but we lived together as a family. He and I came to know each other, starting a relationship that was not father/son, but began to have a familial feel to it.

I think where things really moved to a new level was when his partner got pregnant and he needed to prepare himself to be a father. He had a lot of unresolved anger about his mother not raising him and he set out to deal with it because he didn't want to bring that into his relationship with his own kid. In retrospect, I think that before he could start to accept me as a fatherly-type person in his life (he has his birth father, who raised him, and whom he sees from time to time), he needed to make peace with his feelings about his mother. As it is for most of us, that's an ongoing process. Over the years, he's needed me to talk both with him and with his mom as a mediator and interpreter when things have gotten hot between them. As he has seen that I care about him and about their relationship, that I don't always take Lynn's side, that I see him pretty clearly too, we've grown closer. The trust has grown. Now we talk. We have our own visits. We have our own relationship. He turns to me sometimes when he's sorting things out with his mom, with his ex-wife, about his ex-wife's daughter, about his son. I hope that he feels about me somewhat how I feel about my father-in-law. I care from the heart about him. I celebrate his successes and feel for him when he hurts. I'm honoured that he sometimes comes to me for advice, and I try to give him my best. Maybe all of that would have happened anyway with the passage of time. However, I think that I can understand his challenges and dilemmas better from my perspective as a man. And I think that he can trust that I understand and empathize with him better now that I am a man.

Never having expected to be a father, being a grandfather is its own little miracle. In my case it takes two forms: one simple and sweet, the other complex and somewhat tortured. I'll start with the hard part. When our son got together with his now ex-wife she already had a daughter from a previous relationship. The girl was a sweet little five-year-old when she came into our lives. Back then, they lived a short walk away from us and we saw a lot of the girl. She'd stay overnight with us at least once a week, and there was lots of back-and-forthing between scheduled visits. She never called us her grandparents then. She had two sets already. It was during those years that I transitioned. We never had a conversation with her about it. We just carried on. My body changed as she watched. One day everyone

started calling me Aaron. A few months later she did too, and that was that. We were just there in her life as we grew to be her family too.

A year and a half after her brother was born, when she was a pre-teen, the family moved 750 miles away. Visits dwindled to a week or so a few times a year, and we kept in touch on the phone as best we could. Simultaneously, things became very sore between our son and her mom as they ended their relationship. It was very rough on everyone. Things were said. Things were done. Everyone got hurt. Knowing what we did about the mom, we foresaw that the girl would end up on our doorstep one day asking for refuge. We thought that she would run away, but that's not how it happened. When she was 14 ½ years old and visiting her biological dad, her mom told her not to come home. Our (ex-step-) granddaughter called us and asked to come live with us. We took her in, neither of us ever having raised a child before, let alone a troubled teenaged girl. That's when I became a grandfather as we tried to raise that very hurting teenager.

I'm not convinced that she thought of me as her grandfather before that, but she had to tell her friends at school something, and grandparents was the closest she could come to a sensible description of who we were to her. It was an odd *in-loco-parentis* dance we did for the year and a half that she lived with us. She was angry from having grown up in survival mode in a chaotic environment since she was tiny. Her values and way of relating to other people were about managing to get by in an unpredictable, unfair, and dangerous world. As the man of the house, my job kicked in when I was home after work, and on the weekends. Mostly I served as ballast for the emotional whirlwind that developed when Lynn, her day-to-day caregiver, tried to provide a troubled, high-drama, hormone-fueled, teenaged girl with the first structure, stability, and consistency she had ever known.

I was largely excluded from all of the quiet and warm intimate girl talk about bodies and boys. I was spared some of the tear-filled hysterics, but just as often I was called upon to mediate, moderate, and sometimes to adjudicate. Together, Lynn and I learned a lot about parenting, and our girl started to learn that there are some people in the world who say what they mean and mean what they say, that some people can be counted upon to be consistent, fair, and kind, even generous at times. In the process, we all stretched a lot, and we all grew a lot.

After a year and a half with us, her mother wanted her back, and she went, hoping that things would be different. It wasn't, but she was, and we were. We were her family now too. Within months, things went badly again, but this time our girl pushed back, and so did we. The ensuing truce only lasted a few months. Now she's gone to live with her biological dad, with whom she had never lived before, and who has also never raised any kids before. Things have been rough there too. I've reached out to her dad with fatherly support when his own dad was not able to do so. We've built a bond too. Now our girl is just about to launch into her own adult life. None of us adults think that she is ready, so I expect that there will be lots more parenting/grandparenting to do for many years to come.

It has been hard to see this girl suffer and act out so much. She's tried to do well in school and to get along with people but she's not been taught all the skills that she needs. While I made some pretty major sacrifices in my career to be able to take her in when we did, it was worth it. I am grateful to have her in my life, grateful to have been able to build that relationship, and to give her a glimpse that life can be better than the chaos in which she routinely wraps herself. We have built a bond that will last our lives, and I cherish that. I, who never thought that I would have kids, now have a granddaughter.

Our grandson is still young enough that he has always been a simple joy to me. For reasons that still elude and amaze me, we have a very special bond. When he was too little to know better, he'd say

embarrassing things about wanting to live with us forever. When he stays with us, he's so overwhelmingly focussed on following me around and doing everything that I do that Lynn has to struggle with feelings of jealousy. When I'm at work he asks all day long "when is Zeyda<sup>2</sup> coming home?" We roughhouse; we play outdoors; I read him to sleep every night. In the mornings, we have cuddles in bed and intimate talks until he explodes into raucous boy-child energy. He eats breakfast out of my bowl and has learned to use kid-sized chopsticks, that I brought back for him from China, so that he can be like me. He sits next to me at every meal. I play superheroes with him during bath time. He's still young enough that he trusts me in every way. He still wants to cuddle and sit on my lap and hold my hand, and it melts my heart to goo. He is this unequivocally shining light in my life. I lock away a small niggling fear that one day he will be disappointed to find out that I am trans, and that he will turn away from me because of it. By the time that happens (which could be today) I'm hoping that the reality of our relationship will be enough to carry us through. Meanwhile, I continue to love him and bask in his simple childish devotion. Now I am a grandfather and some kind of role model for a sweet little boy. My heart sings.

Having Lynn love me through so many years and so many changes has given me much more than I can begin to describe in this short essay. What I can say is that she has brought with her a spectrum of family that has enriched my life in ways that go beyond the words that I have. For that, I am profoundly grateful. Being trans has allowed me to mostly heal that one place in my life where I ever really felt regret. While it is still true that I will never have or raise "kids of my own," I am now intensely enmeshed in an extended family, in profoundly meaningful relationships where I am the right version of me: husband, brother, son-in-law, step-father, grandfather. Now, it is up to me to perform those roles with all the honour, respect, kindness, and dignity that they deserve, and that this man can muster.

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<sup>2</sup> Zeyda is Yiddish for grandfather.