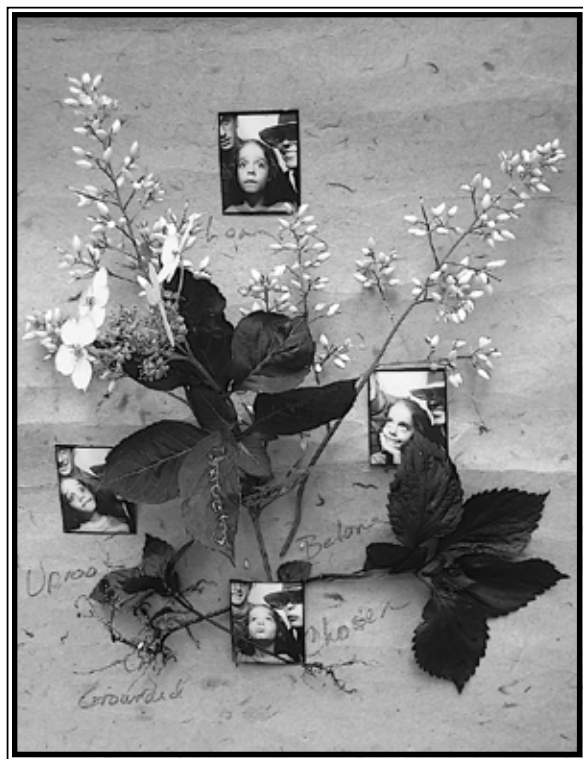


OUT OF LINE: WHO DEFINES?

HALFS, STEPS, IN-LAWS & BELONGING



Heather Tosteson & Charles D. Brockett
Editors

Wising Up Press

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HEATHER TOSTESON

INTRODUCTION OUT OF LINE: WHO DEFINES? THE ORIGINS OF OUR SENSE OF BELONGING

THE LARGER PICTURE: BELONGING

Belonging can be defined as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places (Hagerty et al., 1992).

We often put out a call to expand our own range of experience around an issue of sustained personal interest. Belonging and families certainly is one of those issues. By the responses to our call, we have found, to our edification and relief, we are by no means alone.

I think about our sense of belonging often. What is it composed of exactly? Where does that feeling state come from? What expands it? Constricts it? Is it constructed—or received? Why is it so important to each of us—whether we consciously acknowledge that or not? Is a sense of belonging an emergent phenomenon—one that can't be explained by the structures that preceded it, indeed is qualitatively different from those structures? Are families so important to us because that is where the experience originates—or where we're told it should?

The question is personally salient to us. Charles and I married in our late forties and early fifties, our children to our minds young adults (although they might debate this). Both of us were divorced. The habits and expectations of our different family systems—both with long histories of loss—didn't mesh smoothly. At all. For more years than I like to recall, the two of us argued intensely and often, in the particular and also in the abstract, about what we owed our young adults. It was amazing how such atavistic energies could rise between us when there was, truly, no one else there but our ghosts and our

DEBORAH BARRETT

THE FIRST MEETING

When we walked toward the door to Jim's birth mother's house for the first time, he turned toward me with prayer hands, his signal to say a prayer for us. His apprehension over meeting his birth mom for the first time had increased on the flight from Houston and the bus ride to the outskirts of New York City. I felt uneasy as well. I knew his mom must be as full of anticipation as I knew Jim to be. Also, I worried about capturing their initial moments together without intruding. Jim wanted me to record it, so I planned to do so but hoped to keep the video camera as much out of view as possible. The stories I had read about a child's first encounter with birth parents depicted some going well and some not so well.

I put this meeting in motion by encouraging Jim to find his birth family, for health reasons, if for no other, since he was in his fifties. Neither of us succeeded in locating his relatives, so we hired Pamela, a specialist in finding adopted children and their parents, recommended by the New York Foundling Hospital, which we had stumbled upon on one of our many rambling walks around New York City. The research took her longer than usual, but she called us in six weeks to tell us she had found his birth mom and contacted her to find out for sure before arranging a call between Jim and his mom, Rennie.

Rennie told me later she was suspicious, but Pamela had her first name and maiden name, the name of her high school, and her nickname, "Rennie." Also, she asked her if she knew a Kitty (Jim's father's sister) and if the name "James Jeffrey" meant anything to her. Pamela knew Rennie had the right person and told her Jim was looking for her but did not want anything but to talk to her. After her conversation with Rennie, Pamela told her to call her back if she wanted to talk to him. Rennie said she hung up and was "an emotional wreck." She wanted to talk to Joe, her husband, but he was asleep, and she knew it was too late to call her daughters, so she tried to sleep but



TARRI DRIVER

R. JR.

The school bus dropped me off at the entrance of the neighborhood, and I started the short walk to our house. The house was near the back of the neighborhood, and it was a storybook kind of autumn day, a perfect blue sky, crisp air, and the leaves were beginning to turn orange and yellow and red. I was thinking about nothing and everything as teenagers are apt to do, and I slowed my pace three doors down from the house when I saw an unfamiliar car in the driveway and an unfamiliar man sitting in it. His hair was long, his beard was scraggly. With both hands on the steering wheel, he watched me. With my alarm bells ringing, I defiantly walked into the driveway, averted my eyes, quickly passed the car and entered my house.

The vinegar hit my nose as soon as I walked in the door. I heard my mom in the kitchen with the spray bottle. Brrrrt . . . brrrrt. Silence. Brrrrt . . . brrrrt. Silence. I knew she was frantically cleaning. I also knew she was upset, because cleaning was her main coping skill. She was spraying and wiping the crumbs off the countertops when I asked her about the stranger in the car.

"That's your half-brother, and I don't want you talking to him. Stay away from him! Do you hear me?"

My mom told me that he was currently homeless and wanted to stay with us at the house. That he showed up out of nowhere, and that my mom didn't want him in the house without my dad present. So there he sat, in his car, in the driveway, while we all waited for my dad to get home from work.

I went upstairs to my room and peeked out of the blinds where I could get a good look at the mystery figure. I was intrigued. Who was this guy sitting in our driveway? What was he doing? Where had he been all along? I sat by my window and watched him, and he sat in his car with his hands on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. I sat there and peered out until my feet fell asleep.

When my dad came home from work, he and my mom argued

SHERRYL ENGSTROM

MY EYES ON THE PRIZE

Tik-tock, tick-tock. It starts slowly and softly enough. I am thirty-one years old, thriving in my fulfilling and adventuresome life, except . . . something is missing. The inner beat persists, becoming insistent, demanding. *Tick-tock!* By age thirty-three, while I'm cocooning within the writing of my way-too-long master's thesis, I get it. No more denial or debate; I know full well that I must become a mother.

With M.A. accomplished and a creative writing job I loved, I took action. No man was in sight, so I began the process of adopting a baby girl from India. Then, within months I met Ken, my husband-to-be, leading to the inevitable talk of marriage and family. I was thirty-four and beyond ready. Unfortunately, infertility revealed its scarred face. Fortunately, though, we were both completely comfortable with adoption, so we started the labor-intensive process of networking, choosing an agency and applying. Three years and three foiled trials later, hope rekindled itself; a baby girl was within reach. As we were on our way to meet her, our home phone rang.

"I'm so sorry. The birthmother has changed her mind and does not want to relinquish her baby," said the voice from Hades.

Crestfallen again. After four unfulfilled attempts to become a mother, and having just had my job eliminated, I felt like a motherless child. Drowning in my stewpot of self-pity for weeks, though supported by friends and an infertility counselor, I felt punished by the gods and sure motherhood was not my fate.

The saving grace phone call came—on February 28, 1989, one month shy of my thirty-ninth birthday. We would have a child, a baby boy, just twenty-six days old. We had already picked out our boy name, Anthony, for its meaning alone—precious gift.

My ultimate dream was in my arms. But now what? I worked as an adjunct college instructor and knew other career women who were older or

PAUL LAMB

LATE NEWS

We are old men now, Kelly and I. Age has found us, despite our evasions and denials. Stairs are steeper. Walks are slower. Tasks are left for when the grandsons visit. Gravity tugs at every slack muscle, every extra pound, every bit of loose flesh. In defiance, or perhaps stubbornness, we remain as active as we can, though each day seems to present new limits. Sometimes, all that feels left to us is watching our son, Clarkson, and our twin grandsons live their own younger lives.

Kelly and I have made a good life together. Through our years, he's helped me embrace my emotions. I've tried to help him control his turbulence. Yes, we've had adversity. Any serious relationship does. Yet we've always found ways to return to normal, to ease back into old routines or find our footing in new ones. It's alarming, therefore, that at such a settled time we would receive this late news.

Our grandson Little Curt—my namesake, who is in high school now and prefers LC or just Curt—asked us all to do one of those genetic tests for a project in his biology class. His brother, David, declined, scoffing that since he's his twin, what would he learn that LC didn't? David has always been a little bossy to his brother, but they both seem to need that kind of dynamic.

LC knows we adopted his dad, so his tests wouldn't discover any genetic link to Kelly or me. He's met his father's biological mother a few times, though I don't know if she took the test for him too. On their mother Jordan's side, the twins have a grandmother and an uncle, and presumably a grandfather, though he is never discussed. Years ago, Clarkson had tracked down his biological father using a similar genetic test, but that never went anywhere, apart from making Clarkson and me grow closer. In all, these genetic tests that LC had us take weren't supposed to produce any surprises.

Except they did. And now I sit beside Kelly in our silent front room, as I have many times in our lives, and wait for him to escape the darkness we



MARY-FRANCES SCHNEIDER

THE ENGAGEMENT: A YES, THREE MAYBES, AND ONE OVER MY DEAD BODY

A corner table on the 96th floor of the Hancock building, the harvest moon dotting the lake's blackness with shimmering specks of silver. He slides into the table like a player stealing second base, a black velvet bag dangling between two fingers.

"Will you?" he asks.

"I will," she answers.

When the elevator opens, he turns to her, babbling, giddy, "Let's tell the kids."

She squints. "Maybe in a month," then hedges, "Or possibly, six."

"Tomorrow morning," he chirps, elation fogging empathy.



Her middle-school son, still young enough to cry, dives into the sofa. "I'm Danny in the sixth-grade play. I'm not moving."

"No one is moving." She sits on the sofa's edge and rubs her son's back.

Her college kid, the engineering genius, so like his late father, paces the living room, delineating the pros and cons of this proposed family iteration. She stands, taking his hands into her own. They breathe together into the stillness of her love for him.



His girls. The oldest daughter, first.

He presses the doorbell and spots an eye in the peephole.

He sighs, "She probably guessed why we're here."

The daughter's husband lets the couple in, calling up the staircase to his wife, who has bolted to their bedroom, hands covering her ears.

But, for her, the winds of a tornado are so irresistible that she stomps back down the stairs, eyes blazing, her hand gripping the railing as if she

DOROTHY OLIVER PIROVANO

THREE PLUS FOUR

I didn't want to say out loud that part of my motivation to write a series of articles on single fathers and their problems was to meet men. I wasn't exactly devoid of dates but being a single mother of five- and nine-year-old boys put me in a special—or not so special—category with men who had not had the pleasure of having children.

There was the "She's nice, but kids . . ." reaction.

There was the "She's nice, but I'm not up for a package deal . . ." reaction.

Then there was the "Kids—get me outta here . . ." reaction, which was actually the most common one.

It made sense, then, that finding men who had kids would put me in a dating pool of kindred spirits. Single fathers likely experienced those same reactions.

Pitching my editor was easy. Finding divorced fathers who were raising their children proved to be surprisingly easy, too. Brazenly walking up to men in the parking lot at my youngest son's day care center led me to several.

Widowers were another category. I knew one—an older guy with teenagers. Not date bait to be sure. A guy whose little boy was also at the day care center agreed, so I had two. But I needed at least one more to give depth to the article, preferably someone who might be having challenges dealing with the loss of a wife and being two parents rolled into one.

I was complaining to my mother about my dilemma when she popped up with her best friend's daughter's brother-in-law, who she was pretty sure was widowed and had little kids. I'd known her best friend and her daughter for years and though we hadn't kept up, I made the call to see if she'd connect me.

Not in a million years would he do this, she said. Larry was about the most unlikely person on earth to agree to an interview with a newspaper

THE NEW CRITICISM

My stepdaughter
 says I'm boring.
 "Everything you say
 is boring and like
 so seventies." Her mother
 says I'm wonderful, though.
 "She's being fresh. Don't
 listen to her," she says.
 But I can't help listening
 because I want to be
 fresh and not boring,
 and I want to say 'like'
 like my stepdaughter
 because everything
 is like something, not
 exactly but sort of.
 And she's so contemporary
 and provocative and like
 alive. She knows all the new
 neologisms and would
 never use *neologism*
 in a poem. Like ever.

BRIAN DALDORPH

MUD

Matthew's watching some comedy show with a laugh track. A skinny Black kid with an Afro is trying to explain to his dad sitting on the couch why he doesn't want to try out for the football team.

"Those guys are bigger than Mack trucks!"

Loud laughter.

If I don't say something, Matthew will watch TV all evening. I need to tell him to turn it off, go do his homework. I checked his backpack. History homework, math problems, a Richard Wright story for English. If I tell him it's time for homework, he'll tell me that he's taking a break, that he'll go do it later.

That's what he did last night, then stayed up to 3 a.m., refused to get up in the morning. When I tried to shake him up, he snapped: "Why do I have to listen to *you*? You're not my dad."

That's the truth of it: I'm the intruder in this house.

Julia will get home from her late shift at AmTech too tired to get into a homework fight with Matthew.

"*Whatever*," she'll say. "If you don't want to go to college, Matthew, I can't make you."

Matthew had a rough ride with what happened to his dad, and it's eating at him.

"Wanna go out for ice cream, Matt?"

"No, thanks, Steve. I'm good. Can you shut the door on your way out?"

But I don't leave. I sit down with Matthew on the couch and start watching this comedy show that's about as funny as mud.

TERRI ELDERS

WAITING FOR GOLDILOCKS

I've never thought of myself as a crybaby, though I sob every time I hear "If I Loved You" from *Carousel*, with its allusion to golden chances that we might miss.

And I've whimpered at weddings . . . most memorably at my Grandma Gertie's when she remarried when I was nine years old. My new so-called aunts and uncles and cousins had swiveled their heads around in the pews that autumn afternoon, staring with surprise. I hadn't cared a whit about what these time thieves thought, though. I'd good reason to cry. Grandma would be stepping away!

"I don't mind getting a stepfather," Mama had muttered, "but look at all the rest of them. Mother's picking up so many stepchildren and all their kin. There are only so many hours in a day. She won't be coming around here much anymore."

I'd been horrified. Now I wouldn't be cutting out paper dolls from the Sears catalog with Grandma anymore. And she likely wouldn't have time to make me any new ruffled dresses on her treadle sewing machine. She'd be too busy playing with these new step-grandkids, and sipping cocoa with their parents instead of with Mama and me. I'd counted at least a dozen of these "step" people.

But when tears trickled down my cheeks in the foyer of St. John Romanian Orthodox church a few years ago, everybody in attendance cast a curious glance my way. I mean, who cries at christenings, aside from infants? I felt relieved when baby Kendra obliged with some howls when she was plunged into the baptismal basin, so grateful that she'd diverted attention from me. I fished in my purse for a handkerchief to blot my cheeks dry. My step-granddaughter and I had wailed for different reasons, though. I suspect she just felt cold, while I felt . . . old.

I'd never expected I'd ever become a grandmother of any kind, natural,

SHERRY SHAHAN

FACE BEYOND THE MASK

My stepbrother Kevin S.B. is a drifter with arrests in more than one state. Born in August 1961, he's sixty years old, paunchy, stubby-limbed, and has bad skin. He's a loner with a fondness for young boys.

Early in 2017, he drove his clunky RV from the Pacific Northwest, where he'd lived off the grid, to Southern California. Kevin parked his rig in the driveway of our father's home, Louis P.B. He said he'd be there a couple of weeks before "going on the road with my music."

Truth is, it worried me. I'd grown up in Woodland Hills, a suburb of the San Fernando Valley, a 260-square-mile enclave of Los Angeles. Despite its name, Woodland Hills doesn't have an impressive number of trees or hills. The latest census notes 125,000 residents. Retirement is such a big business that dozens of assisted living facilities are in the area.

I loved the 1950s-style boxy houses with their colonial brick chimneys. Back then, the purchase price was around \$10,000. Now, prime real estate. Lisa Kudrow, Maureen McCormick, and Ice Cube attended high school there.

This was my mother's home for sixty-four years. She died a half-dozen years back on the living room couch with the plaid fabric she'd chosen from a stack of swatches at Sears, her favorite go-to department store. A hushed memory of her lounging on the loveseat beneath the window, hooked to an oxygen tank, a balled-up Kleenex in a sleeve, her dark brown eyes deep in a trashy paperback. Memories that make my skin itch.

At eighty-nine, Lou still managed the house and his investments, walked more than five miles a day, and had a robust social life with family and church friends.

Right off, Kevin convinced our father to switch banks and be added as a co-signer on the accounts, thus becoming the sole beneficiary of bank and retirement accounts. I tracked down the institution and eventually spoke to a sympathetic manager. "If Mr. B. agreed to put Kevin on the accounts, then



RACHAEL JONES

MY FATHER'S WIFE

We were talking about strip clubs when the marriage came up. It was a sunny day out, and my boyfriend, Stephen, and I were, as usual, lounging on the porch drinking coffee. He said he wouldn't go to the strip clubs in the Keys on his upcoming vacation if I didn't want him to go, but that of course his father would be going. I snorted, "That's different; your dad isn't married."

"Yes, he is." Stephen said quickly.

"What?" Stephen and I had been together for almost a year, and I didn't know his dad was married. "You have a stepmother?"

Stephen repositioned his arm, "Not a stepmother. My father has a wife." He told me that his father had met a woman in Spain years ago, and they had fallen in love and gotten married in Vegas without telling anyone, "That's my dad for you," he said.

I went inside to get more coffee. What did I know about steps and halves and in-laws? Nothing—that was what. My parents had been married for thirty years and my grandparents, sixty years. Both sets of my grandparents were best friends, the four of them riding to church dinners and trips to Applebee's together. I burned my hand on the glass coffee pot and cursed as I ran it under the cold water. This would make our upcoming trip to a family wedding more interesting. Stephen had already told me that I would be staying with him at his father's house in Cape Cod, and I wondered if this Spanish wife would be there too.

As it turned out, the Spanish wife was not there. Stephen's twin brother, Arnold said, "God, I never see her. I don't trust her, and I don't know what the deal is. She's always out of the country." I winced at the use of the Lord's name being said like that, but I too thought the whole thing was interesting. Who was this mysterious stepmother of my boyfriend's, and would she one day become my step-mother-in-law?

ANNA STEEGMANN

THE MOTHER-IN-LAW

She looked like a chubby, lovely old lady. Her hair was straight, short, and very white, and her skin had the texture of parchment paper, a testament to having spent too many summers at the Jersey shore. She reminded me of a lizard. The small eyes. The wrinkled skin. Zofia moved around, wobbling from side to side with the help of a cane or walker. She lived alone in a house in a small village near Lumberland in Upstate New York. There was not much to the village of Glen Spey: a gas station, two churches, a Byzantine Catholic and a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a cemetery, a camp for terminally ill children, and a recently revitalized Ukrainian Cultural Center. Anyone would feel sorry for an eighty-four-year-old woman living alone in an isolated place covered with snow for many months. Except me, her daughter-in-law.

Zofia lost her husband of fifty-two years in a car accident. She was in the hospital for several months afterward, recuperating from her injuries. Arthritic pain, a new hip, and the extra pounds on a small frame made it difficult and painful to get around. For years, she had not used the beautiful upstairs, airy master bedroom with its shiny parquet floor, large windows, balcony, and panoramic view of the lake. She preferred holding court in the dark family room with the large TV and its seventy-five channels and made the sofa her bed. Upstairs, the sunny living room was preserved like a museum display, with sixties furniture and garish wallpaper. Even when her husband was still alive, they never used the living room, not even on Christmas or Thanksgiving. Life was spent in the dark basement. The couple had different tastes in TV shows and always had two television sets blaring simultaneously.

Initially, Zofia seemed to like me. I was from Germany, where the family had ended up at the end of World War II as displaced persons from the Soviet Union. She had fond memories of her neighbors in the small village on Lake Constance, her husband wheeling and dealing on the black market. Roman had warned me: "My mother is weird, especially around food. She cooks

HEATHER TOSTESON

BLOODLINES AND BABIES

Diane

He's our first grandchild. Andy and I were so excited when we heard. We'd had our concerns about the marriage, which we did our very best to hide. It happened so fast and there was a child on her side. And Dylan, at twenty-four, was five years younger. Honestly, we expected to learn within months that they were expecting, that that was what had precipitated the visit to Asheville City Hall in September when they had only met in May. But we didn't get that call for a full twelve months. By then, we'd all come into some kind of new balance, or so Andy and I thought. Certainly the start hadn't been smooth.

No one was being invited to the wedding we were told at the time. Sparrow said she thought it was enough change for her daughter Sam just to have Dylan as part of their household. She didn't want to burden her with extra personalities. Andy and I were a little taken aback. We're mild-mannered people, so it made us wonder how Dylan had described us to her. But, like I said, we thought the marriage expedient and we thought Sparrow had a point if they had, as we assumed, another baby on the way only five months after the two of them had met.

So, we invited them all to join us up here at Thanksgiving instead. But Sparrow, who taught fifth grade, said Maryland was too long a drive for a short visit and she didn't have the time for a longer one.

Christmas, we suggested. Dylan's sister would be home from Seattle with her boyfriend, and both Andy's parents and mine would be coming over from their retirement homes. We've always been a close family. Andy and I are both only children, so it has been a joy to us that our parents have enjoyed each other so much that we've all always celebrated holidays together.

But Christmas belonged to Sparrow's family, Dylan told us. Sam had always done this. She counted on it. They couldn't change this—certainly

ROBIN LANEHURST

HOW TO BE A STEPMOTHER TO YOUR DEAD BEST FRIEND'S DAUGHTERS

First, I love you.

First, you know how to do this.

First, everything you know about being a mother is wrong.

Sit with this, if you can find a moment. Close the door to the bedroom you will soon share with my husband, even if you are alone in the house, alone with the echoes of our children hurtling down the stairs, stomping about in the attic, screaming and swinging and leaping from branches in the backyard. The echoes make it hard to hear, I know. The echoes remind you of all that you've learned in the past three decades about being a mother. We learned how to be mothers together. We will unlearn how to be mothers together.

Listen: you may not hear my voice saying these words, you may not be able to imagine my voice ever saying words like these, words in this order, words in this tone, words at this volume. This may not be my voice at all, but one you've invented and attributed to my ghost. I understand. I understand how the dead fall silent, how I must allow myself to be reinvented, over and over and over again, used for someone else's purposes. Take a lesson from that—this is what it means to be a stepmother.

Hold on to your belief in life after death, in grace and faith alone, even though my husband and my daughters believe there is no heaven and no God to have sent me there. Hold on to my uncertainty of what came next, my ambiguity between an Episcopalian childhood and a microbiology degree. Keep me in your prayers, whisper the pleas you might have cried had I allowed you at my bedside when I took my final breaths. Forgive me my shame; I wanted to die

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