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ONE PARENT'S JOURNEY TO DISCOVERING HER SELF IN A BLENDED
FAMILY: IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS AND ADVOCATES

A Thesis Presented

by

Bethany Wolfe

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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Thesis Examination Committee:

Robert J. Nash, Ph.D., Advisor

Stuart L. Whitney, Ed.D., RN, Chairperson

Colleen T. MacKinnon, Ed.D.

Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

ABSTRACT

Self-discovery is an important process to the personal and social development of children and adults. Today's educators need to acknowledge and encourage the process of self-discovery in children in order for them to enjoy an enriched life of meaning and fulfillment. The implications of my story, that of a co-parent in a loving and nurturing blended family, are robust to educators and families. I challenge educators working with co-parented children to see the benefits of co-parenting and how not all blended families result in troubled, imbalanced, or resentful children and parents, as much of the current literature suggests. I urge educators to promote the process of self-discovery in children of blended families using an interdisciplinary approach. I embolden parents to listen to the stories their children have to tell and incorporate their experiences into the meaning making experience of raising a family and to remember that they are their children's primary educators.

Written within a Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology, my thesis proposes that, through the process of self-discovery, children, parents, educators and advocates can work together to create meaningful experiences within their own lives. I will write a realistic, but kind and compassionate story with a variety of characters that are relatable to anyone who is in or knows someone who is in a blended family. Blended families are becoming increasingly common which highlights how the culture in this particular micro-society is changing as a result of individual and family needs. This thesis will shed light on this natural occurrence in a clear and accessible way that speaks to children and parents in blended families, educators working with these individuals as well as bystanders, friends, family and advocates of families of all types.

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First and foremost I would like to thank my family Adam, Taylor, William, Susan and Sydney for being the inspiration for my writing. Our unique bond, the forgiveness and love with which we greet each other encouraged me to explore and describe our story. I would also like to thank my exuberant and tireless advisor, Robert, for asking thoughtful and provoking questions and being patient with me as I found my voice.

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INTRODUCTION

When I initially thought about this project I knew that the process of self-discovery would be one pillar of my thesis. The process has deepened my life as a parent as well as my experiences as an educator. I have found it extremely rewarding to bring this process to my own children and to other co-parented children and blended families. The essence of my personal pedagogical philosophy and my professional values as an educator is self-discovery and finding meaning in experience.

I have chosen to write my thesis in a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing style. I chose this writing style because in it I, as an author, am able to more powerfully and poignantly express what being a co-parent in a blended family means to me. Being both personal and scholarly, SPN draws from the experiences of the author and applies general concepts and implications to a broader audience. SPN and self-discovery come together for me in my writing, in that I use my personal experiences to create a more generalizable theme that others can draw from in their own lives. I have used the process of self-discovery to create this SPN. Through writing I have learned more about myself. As a result of the melding of these two processes – self-discovery and the act of writing – I feel I am more prepared to guide my children, encourage other educators and reach out to other blended families who are on their own journey.

The vast majority of research and books on co-parenting and blended families discuss how to talk to the children about divorce, how to handle a jealous ex-spouse or what the step-parent should do to be an active part in their step-child's life. When I found out my then boyfriend (now husband) had a daughter my simple reaction was "ok." It

didn't change how I felt about him but what did start to worry me was when other people found out he had a daughter. They told me to be careful, that I was going to have a hard time dealing with her because I was the outsider, and that his ex-would make my life a living hell. These warnings stirred up some major questions; where was I in all of this? If she already had two parents what was my role in our family? Would she hate me like all the literature said she was going to?

This thesis will encourage me to face my own understanding of my role in our family, describe how the three adults worked to build trust among one another, and ultimately how we gave each other and our daughter the strength, love, hope, and trust that she and we deserved. I promise to shed new light on co-parenting and approach it from a perspective of openness, curiosity, and love. My time has come to show a different side of blended families; to show a family that actually loves one another and truly has the best interest of the child at the center of everything.

METHODOLOGY

Scholarly Personal Narrative writing (SPN) has some unique characteristics and benefits that provide a distinct lens through which I have chosen to write my thesis. I was first introduced to the SPN style of writing during my first semester of coursework at the University of Vermont in the Masters of Education in Interdisciplinary Studies program. My classmates and I were advised to read the course syllabus (which was written in the form of a letter to us from the professors) and use it as a tool to guide our work that semester. This particular pedagogical approach by Professor Nash was refreshing. A syllabus that would actually *help* us throughout the semester rather than a timeline of

requirements, deadlines and warnings about attendance. The letter addressed all the usual requirements of the course such (attendance, assignments, readings, expectations) but it also introduced who our professors were as people. It talked about their different approaches to learning and how we as a class community would be engaging and learning from one another. What struck me the most was that it encouraged us to find and speak our own voice and it encouraged me to get personal with my learning.

In response to this letter of introduction we were asked to submit a learning contract. This contract would serve as our tool to hold ourselves accountable. I wrote in that very first piece of writing that my goal for the class was to use my own experiences to guide others in finding their own meaning. I wanted to learn how to teach others to be their own advocates and to listen to other's experiences in order to better understand how they find meaning in their own lives. I vowed to listen, read, write and to speak all with an open mind, a reflective hear and an eagerness to learn. I soon realized that this was the first step of my journey to writing an SPN thesis.

Scholarly personal narrative writing is organized to start with the "I" before incorporating the outward scholarship and reflection. As Professor Nash explains in the syllabi of his graduate classes, SPN writing is a way for the author to admit that their life has meaningⁱ. As an SPN author, I am taking a risk in sharing my personal story but I'm also citing other authors' works and ideas that I draw meaning from. SPN writing encourages the writer to put what matters most to them first and find meaning in what they are trying to convey "both to self and to others"ⁱⁱ." This type of writing includes particular themes supported by personal examples but also incorporates generalizable messages so that the readers can relate to the themes. SPN writing is characterized by

four major components, as described by Robert: identification of major themes, connecting the themes to personal stories, drawing on existing research and scholarship to enrich the personal narrative, and concluding with “universalizable” ideas that connects with the readers. These components, as Robert calls them, are the “pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search” that make up SPN writingⁱⁱⁱ.

I am drawn to the SPN style of writing for a couple of reasons. It appeals to me because at the core of all humans is the desire to connect with someone. We are social creatures by nature and telling our own personal narratives allows us to see the “human” in the being. It forces us to see someone else’s point of view and, while we may not completely understand, it delivers a strong message. SPN writing allows me as the author to be honest and, hopefully, clear without fearing that I’m doing it wrong.

I like SPN writing because it seems to be a great mix of the personal with the researched. It presents themes that a general audience can relate to without being too “foreign” to someone who may not be an academic. It guides the author to use existing research in order to tell their own story. I like this because my experience has always been to use scholarly journals and books for research so that, in its own way, is a comfort to this slightly foreign style of writing to me. I also like the idea that SPN welcomes readers to become a part of the author’s story. This brings the narrative in front of the reader and audience and might just help them see their own world a little differently.

Whenever I read or write an SPN I am often struck by how much the piece is like having an actual conversation with the author. I, as an author, hope that my audience finds this comforting and conducive to learning and understanding a

little bit more about me and my pedagogy. Since the goal of SPN writing has a lot to do with making connections, it comes down to good and diligent editing. This I like. I like the meticulousness of it. I enjoy, yes, enjoy, agonizing over each word and phrase to make sure I'm expressing exactly what I want to say. Knowing the subject well helps, but I find that during this editing process and the re-reading I do find out things that I didn't know before. I have those "wow, I didn't realize I felt that way" moments frequently, especially during my current writing endeavor. Using the SPN style of writing, for me, is like discovering or re-discovering something about myself or my experiences that I may have forgotten. I understand this may not always be easy or painless depending on the topic but it is, none the less, important in self-realization.

I enjoy a good challenge and that is another reason that SPN writing speaks to me as an author. It is not the easiest form of writing. You have to rely a lot on yourself and your own thoughts and creative capability. The answer or the right way to express something is not in a journal or in a book. It's in your own head. That is the challenging part; figuring out where that thought is and how to get it down clearly on paper. The most challenging part of writing SPN for me is the move from the particular to the general; figuring out the hypothesis' (the "now what") that go with my facts (the "what" and "so what"). Throughout my writing I will describe the facts about my story as I see them and try to encourage my readers to see the implications in their own lives and in the lives of those they educate, guide, encourage and parent.

CONSIDERATION OF CURRENT LITERATURE

Traditional, single parent, blended or extended families help us define ourselves. We learn from one another and from our individual roles in our family. Families play developmental, social, physical, emotional and moral roles in our development. Today there is not one mold that every family fits into. The old model of a blended family – a stepfamily – is long out of date and out of favor with current research and literature. Walsh describes blended families as becoming the dominate family structure in the United States while maintaining the assumption that traditional nuclear families are falling by the wayside^{iv}. The number of children living within blended families has increased and this brings to light a whole new set of considerations for parents, children and educators. Walsh lists potential problems that children and parents face in these families; what to call the stepparent, expectations for affection, how to deal with the loss of familial relationships, and role confusion. I would even include how the blended family is structured – who makes up the family – as an important consideration.

Part of the reason for examining blended families through my personal narrative is because my story is unique in some ways and not unique in others; my blended family is cohesive, loving and nurturing in our own way but we are joined by roughly 95 million adults who are in some way connected by step-relationships^v. In 2003, 40% of all married couples with children were made up of step-couples^{vi}. My children joined the more than one-third of children in the U.S. who live in a step-parent home before the age of 18 and the 50% who have a stepparent at some point in their lives^{vii}. The majority of stepfamilies begin with divorce but ours didn't; this was actually easier to handle for me as the non-biological parent of my stepdaughter rather than being the “other woman” in a marriage

that didn't work. That is not to say that it has been easy. Marriage in a blended family can be challenging. Challenges for blended families often include troubles when dealing with family issues, strain put on the marriage by the children and the fear that creating a blended family would put additional strain on a marriage. On average, one study shows that couples in stepfamilies have three times the amount of stress in their first few years of marriage relative to traditional marriages^{viii}. Well where was this statistic nine years ago when I entered into my blended family?! This helps me to understand that blended families may face the same stresses as traditional families but perhaps in a different way. It also highlights the fact that there is not a lot of discussion about the challenges that are unique to blended families.

One of the challenges that many blended families face may be seen by outsiders as a positive impact of blended families; multiple parents in a child's life to love them. Robert Simon describes loving a child and parenting as very different things^{ix}. Being a parent takes commitment to the child and participation in their life. It means taking their needs, growth, development and emotion into consideration when making decisions that affect them. Being raised by more than one parent means that the child receives increased attention on multiple levels. The reality is that some of this attention may be unwarranted by the child and it can cause an imbalance in parental roles in which co-parents are involved. When we became a blended family we had to redefine what it meant for us to be parents and what it meant to love our daughter. There is no doubt in my mind that all three of us love our daughter unconditionally. Love is the easy part. When it comes to parenting, however, that is where my husband and I became the "functional parents" for the better part of a decade.

The psychological and emotional attachment to my daughter's biological mother, our co-parent, is intimate for all of us. There is no denying her ties to our daughter and to us all. There have been times, however, that being the "functional parents" has caused us to view things, make decisions and act differently than our co-parent would. We know her friends, we have met her teachers and we know the culture and atmosphere of her school and her social group. We know how she looks and feels and acts when she stays up until midnight doing homework then has to get up at 6am for school. We know which food she likes (today, as that changes weekly) and we know what her daily routine is. We know when to leave her alone and when she needs someone to talk to. This is parenting. We were there for her every day for everything, not just when she wanted new jeans or a new car. We went to teacher conferences and basketball games, we stayed home with her when she was sick and took days off work when there were snow days. We have watched her grow up and test her boundaries and figure out what she knows and what she doesn't. As co-parents we all played a role in this in different ways. Our attachment to her is different for all of us and the way she sees us has impacted our individual relationships with her. We are co-parents for life and we have undertaken a shared-parenting situation for our daughter.

Regardless of the challenges that being a blended family presents, the one essential component has been the "continuation of functional co-parenting" that exists in our blended family and we have chosen a rather unique cooperative method to parenting; this only exists in roughly 25% of co-parents in which the adults utilize problem solving techniques and negotiate their differences to make

child-centered decisions^x. My husband and I are the rule setters and boundary makers; our co-parent (our daughter's biological mother) is the sounding board and our daughter's friend. Our challenges as parents are not unique but the way we problem solve and negotiate them is. I think because we did not get where we are as a result of a divorce or custody dispute we are more able to see each other's perspective and make a plan that includes our daughter's voice rather than making one that stifles her.

When I met my husband I didn't know anyone who was in a stepfamily that had not begun with divorce. I also didn't know any blended families that functioned in a truly kind, compassionate and supportive way. My personal narrative highlights a positive experience of a blended family, but as Howell, Weers and Kleist state, "In the U.S. society, the term step, when combined with mother, father, child or family, is often used to indicate abnormal or substandard^{xi}." While stepfamilies may not function significantly differently than traditional nuclear families, the levels of satisfaction within the families among members and the quality of relationships between family members vary greatly. Quick, Newman, and McKenry examined relationships within stepfamilies and found that the children's perceptions of the family's ability to support one another was highly correlated with the quality of the relationships between family members^{xii}. Reading this encourages me to continue to work on the relationships within my own family; in order to raise strong, independent, and productive children I want them to know that no matter the makeup of our family structure, we are there to support and encourage one another.

Defining a blended family is hard enough; trying to understand the feelings of the individuals involved presents another level of depth that most children, parents and educators struggle with. Joining a blended family is a huge leap of faith and this collision

can be underestimated by those directly involved as well as educators who work with parents and children in blended families. There are resources available for people in this situation but very little in the way of practical solutions to potential challenges faced by the families. Many of the books available are written from the “now that you’re a stepparent” or “dealing with your new husband’s kids” perspective; not exactly therapeutic or reassuring. The process of forming a new family is one of the biggest challenges and some educators and counselors effectively utilize a group approach aimed at helping blended families^{xiii}. I found myself talking to anyone I could about the experience of being a stepparent. Blended families – both the parents and children – can find encouragement, support, reassurance and comradery in working with other blended families.

In a blended family, it is often not the joining of the family itself that causes anxiety among family members, but the changes it brings. The changes in relationships between children and parents and among the separated or co-parents has not been a central focus of much research. Most research focuses on the negative consequences of divorce or separation rather than the nature of the change^{xiv}. There is such variation in how blended families are brought together that research examining the phenomenon often has mixed or limited findings^{xv}. There is an assumption that children of blended families experience a lower level of well-being in part due to the variability and lack of consistency in parental influence among these children^{xvi}. I was one of the lucky ones; my stepdaughter encouraged her dad and me to get married. She knew that we were happy and loving and supportive of one another. Her biological parents had never been

married and had only lived together for one year when she was first born. She never knew two parents living under one roof and I believe her desire to experience this ultimately made our transition to a blended family easier than most. I would argue that her well-being was lower before our blended family united testing traditional assumptions that co-parenting and blended families have an overall negative impact on the children involved.

Knowing that your complicated and often unique situation has similar characteristics of another families' is helpful in overcoming some of the initial challenges that blended families face. Educators, counselors and school consultants that are aware of the unique needs of blended families can advocate for the children in school and the parents at home. Using personal narratives from the individuals can be an effective and efficacious approach in examining and supporting the needs of these families^{xvii}. The practical issue is how do you address the significant needs of a blended family that arises from pieces of old ones? The issues are not cut and dry and through conversation and sharing personal narratives, parents, children and educators can encourage and support one another. Talking about expectations, assumptions and needs is important so that all members of the family feel heard.

CHAPTER 1: OUR FAMILY STORY

1.1 Defining our blended family

Fact 1: I am a co-parent in a blended family. *Hypothesis:* Educators who work with co-parented children can learn from my experience that not all blended families are a) based on race or culture, b) are the result of a tumultuous adult relationship, and c) create troubled, imbalanced, resentful children (or parents).

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a blended family as “a family that includes children of a previous marriage of one spouse or both.”^{xviii} To me a blended family is one that includes adults and children, related by blood, marriage or other common unifying bond, living in the same household or residing apart. My blended family consists of myself and my husband, our son, and my husband’s daughter from a previous relationship, my stepdaughter, Taylor. I also think of Taylor’s mother and Taylor’s half-sister as part of our family even though they don’t live with us. The term co-parent as defined by Random House is “a divorced or separated parent who shares equally with the other parent in the custody and care of a child.”^{xix} I use the term co-parent to refer to my husband and to my stepdaughter’s mother, Susan. I shy away from using the terms stepdaughter, stepmom, and referring to Susan as my husband’s ex because those words carry a negative connotation. My experience in our blended family has had its challenges but has categorically been a wonderful experience. That saying “it takes a village to raise a child” has been our family motto for the past ten years.

We are collectively raising three children and could not do it without the help from each other.

I purposefully use the term *blended family* for a number of reasons; it presents a different way for educators to look at family dynamics and identity that go beyond race and culture, and it very poignantly describes my family. The term *blended family* has replaced stepfamily in many ways to describe a family that may not consist of two adults and their biological/birth children. Blended families often refer to family units that have at least one non-biological parent and most blended families have been made through remarriage of one or both adults. However, given the changing definition and characteristics of families, a blended family can also describe a household that consists of non-married adults and any combination of children from previous relationships, biological or otherwise.^{xx} My family as I am referring to it here is a blend of individuals with different backgrounds and upbringings. We all have different beliefs in faith and spirituality, chose different educational and career paths, view parenting differently, and our roles as parents are unique from one another. We all present varying degrees of standards depending the situation, but the bottom line is our own personal opinions come in to play more often than not.

If you were to ask me if I have any kids I would say yes, I have two. I have a daughter, recently turned 18, and a son who is pushing 5. I rarely if ever make a distinction between the two as my children even though my daughter is not my biological child. She has two mothers and a father; we are her parents. We have been a blended family for more years than not since Taylor was born. I became a mother before I became a wife. I was looking at elementary schools for my daughter before I was looking at

wedding rings or houses. Do I think I treat Taylor differently than other non-biological (“step”) mothers treat their children? Do I treat her differently than I treat my biological son? Maybe, but don’t all parents treat their children differently? Each child is unique and special in their own way. What Taylor and I need from each other is very different than what she needs from her biological mother or her father. As a family we fill in the gaps.

1.2 Exposing the Unexposed

If I were asked why I want to write about my family I probably wouldn’t have as strong of a reaction as Anne Lamott’s students who say “I will not be silenced again” but I would probably agree that it is a way for me to find my voice. As Lamott describes, “we write to expose the unexposed.”^{xxi} The reason I write, or that I am writing, is to expose the positive experiences, the “ah-ha” moments, and the joyous triumphs that I have had. I find that so many narratives focus on overcoming a substantial hardship, a terrible trauma, or an extreme life challenge. They may end with a conquering hero but the plot is rarely uplifting at its core. The truth of my experience that I hope to expose in my narrative is one of trust, love, discovery, and connection. I have built this narrative day by day. It has evolved over the course of the last ten years and I am ready to share it.

So do I want to write or to be published? Well, “written by Bethany M. Wolfe” has a nice ring to it, but truth be told I just want to share my story. I feel it in my bones that what I have to say is worth writing about. It has taken me a while to come to this realization. I’m still working out the “how” but it will happen. As Lamott says,

“you don’t have to see where you’re going, you don’t have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you^{xxii}.” I honestly can’t see my ultimate destination or all the obstacles I will face along the way but I do see a few feet ahead of me. I can see some of the people that I will lean on for support and guidance. I can see some of the mechanisms I will use to help me reach my goals. I can even see my shitty first draft forming in front of my eyes! You need to start sometime and somewhere so why not start right now?

My biggest fear in writing, and specifically writing about my experience as a co-parent, is writing something that no one wants to read. I think it would be easier to hear that my writing skill level is sub-par but my story is wonderful, rather than hearing I am a technically skilled writer but the plot is boring or un-relatable. While I was reading *Bird by Bird* I kept thinking about how to develop my characters and the plot so that people would actually want to read my story. But I don’t have to make them up; the characters are real, the plot is my life, the experiences and challenges actually happened. What if no one really cares? What if I am focusing on the wrong person or the wrong challenge amidst all of this other fantastic writing material and I just can’t see it? Maybe my story should be fiction instead of a personal narrative. Maybe I need an underappreciated, disrespected, social outcast as a main character who faces extreme adversity yet somehow manages to climb up to the top of the proverbial ladder and change the world! Now THAT would be a best-selling narrative!

Another fear I have is not knowing when to quit. As is common with most people, when I find something I am passionate about I can just talk on and on about it. Want to talk about running? Do you have three hours? Do you have kids? Let’s compare our

adventures as they crawl, walk, jump, and climb their way through the world. Or how about health and wellness? Better set aside all afternoon for that one! But really... how do you know when you're done writing? I find Lamott's answer of "you just do" unsatisfying. My type-A personality wants a clear cut answer. Well, thanks but no thanks, Anne. Since my story has a unique plot of its own and the characters are not just going to ride off happily into the sunset, I want to know at what point I am supposed to stop sharing my story. Do I stop writing about my life as a co-parent from the moment my step daughter graduated high school or turned 18? I guess that is technically when I stopped co-parenting a child. I am now am providing a different kind of support to an adult. My life is not perfect; our family is not perfect; our parenting has not been perfect. But it's ours and it's the best we can do.

One of the best things I took away from Lamott's book, *Bird by Bird*, is the idea that in order to write something really worth writing about you have to put yourself at the center. She says that "you need to put yourself at the center, you and what you believe to be true or right. The core, the ethical concepts in which you post passionately believe are the language in which you are writing^{xxiii}." This became abundantly clear to me this summer when I started outlining my thesis. I thought I had an idea of what I wanted to write about. I started writing some guiding questions, doing a little me-search to get my creative juices flowing, and thought I was on the right path. It was during one of my runs as I was reflecting on a conversation I had with my stepdaughter's mother that it hit me; I had to share my experience as a co-parent. I am at the center of this story and the characters are my family. The plot is our life and how we overcome challenges. How we've built our relationships to raise

our children is the storyline. To some that may seem too, well, ordinary, but I see our blended family as so much more than that. Lamott says that in order to be a good writer you have to care. I trust my instincts and I know in my gut that because I care, in a gut-wrenching, heart-melting, tear-inducing kind of way, that my writing will be powerful and meaningful.

Lamott says that when you care enough to write, “a few small things seem suddenly clear, things to which we can cling, and this makes us feel like part of the solution^{xxiv}.” My hope is that anyone who reads my writing is able to take away a few small things to which they can cling in order to feel like they are a part of their own solution. I didn’t always feel like I was part of the solution in my blended family but I cared enough to figure out how to become one. The generalizable part of my story is the compassion I feel for my family, the lessons I learn as a parent and an individual, the idea of self-discovery and how parents and educators can encourage this for children.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROCESS OF SELF DISCOVERY

2.1 This I am

Fact 2: The process of self-discovery was a secondary result of being a co-parent.

Hypothesis: Parents in co-parenting situations can learn a lot about themselves and their roles in the family through the process of self-discovery and reflection.

I am a wife, a mother, a step-mom, and a co-parent in a sometimes awkward and confusing (yet never dull) blended family. Practically speaking, these terms all relate to my role in our family in relation to others – in relation to my husband, my kids, and my

step-daughter's mother. But my identity and my experience is so much more than this! I want to share my experiences in a way that others in blended families can relate to. Even beyond those individuals in blended families I think educators and professionals can learn from my story. The experience of being a co-parent has showed me that there is no one definition of family. It has also provided me the opportunity to travel on a path of self-discovery.

Being a good parent, to me, means acknowledging one's role in the development of a child but also of oneself. I think I am a good parent because I am able to reflect on who I am now as a person since having children but I'm also able to recognize how I've grown and changed. I am a parent in a blended family, but I'm also a student, a runner, an amateur chef, a sister, a friend, and a colleague. I am strong, motivated, trustworthy, honest and kind. I am always eager to learn, scared of being vulnerable and anxious with uncertainty.

I grew up in a very traditional working class family with parents who married young and stayed together through good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, raising three daughters, and learning daily how to function as a family. When I think about my "self" in this scenario I always think about myself in relation to my family members; where I am with regard to my sisters and what I am to my parents. I guess to that end not much has changed now that I am the adult. When I think about who I am now I automatically think, "I'm a mom and a wife." I secondarily associate my identity with my career, my hobbies, and my educational situation. So where is my "self" in all of this? I don't think my struggle is unique; children and adults in blended families consider this regularly.

What is unique is my internal struggle to find myself in our family, determine what my role is not only in relation to everyone else but also to find out what it means to me to be part of our exceptional family as an individual – as Bethany.

It takes great courage to open up and tell aspects of your life. It makes you realize that others can be quick to judge and it makes you believe that either you are eternally alone in your thoughts and feelings, or that you are not unique at all; I'm not sure which is worse. The bottom line is we judge ourselves more than anyone else. Our lives and our stories are packed with everyday circumstances, experiences and memories and our existence is filled with an endless supply of doubt. We are social and emotional creatures and understanding who we are in relation to others is an integral part in understanding ourselves.

As Edward Wilson observes in his study on human existence, we are best explained by our need and desire for social interaction^{xxv}. We think about all the other people we interact with and wonder what our place is in all of this. We make meaning out of our interactions and find comfort in the stories and relationships we share with others. As part of a blended family, these interactions become even more sensitive. We start asking ourselves if our family is who and what we want it to be. Despite the fact that millions of American families are members of blended families, we are still often plagued by the negative stereotypes and misconceptions about our families. Does my daughter see me as the “wicked stepmother” whenever I tell her “no?” Sharing my story and my perspective with my co-parents and other parents in blended families has helped me find my own meaning in my experiences. It has also helped me to make sense of my situation.

At times I feel that nothing I do is as good as my daughter's biological mother. I have been in between a rock and a hard place when trying to make decisions with my daughter for fear of pissing off her biological mother. I have also been deemed a "martyr" by some people who think I do things solely to "rescue" my daughter in some way. I assure you this is not an accurate portrayal of me as a mother or of our family. I have felt underappreciated, unheard, misunderstood and underestimated as a parent. I have also felt loved, supported, encouraged and trusted. I am neither a perfect mother nor a martyr and I do not identify as an evil stepmother. Being a co-parent has encouraged me to identify myself how I want to be portrayed, not how some fairy tale says I should be seen. I decided to shape my own narrative and I hope that my narrative encourages other parents to do the same.

2.2 A Sense of Belonging

One of my earliest memories of our blended family was from the first summer that I met Taylor and Susan. I didn't know what to say or how to act. I remember thinking that regardless of my relationship with Adam, Susan and Taylor and Adam are joined for life. They will always be with each other. Their memories are silent and unbreakable. The longevity of their relationship and the bond that Adam and Susan have is immeasurable.^{xxvi} Is there anything greater that brings two souls together than that of having a child? I wondered if I ever would fit in to that mix. Would my relationship with Adam ever be that strong? Would I ever have those memories with Taylor?

Ten years later I realize that our family is just beginning to make memories. Part of my journey in finding my place in our blended family was realizing that it's ok that Adam and Susan and Taylor have their memories that don't include me or our son, William. I used to feel threatened by the lack of history that Adam and I didn't have. I felt left out of conversations and sort of "second best" to Susan and Taylor. It has taken some soul searching but I know that their history is what binds them and our collective memories strengthen and broaden that history and our future. Now we can share stories of our vacations and family movie nights. We can explain to William how it is that we are all connected as a family – blood or not. These memories provide substance and meaning to our blended family and for that I could not be more grateful.

In *Acts of Faith*, Eboo Patel talks about gaining a sense of belonging through the process of embracing his identity in a country that does not see as one of their own^{xxvii}. Being too much of anything in a foreign place will challenge anyone's sense of individuality, identity and integration. The feeling of inadequacy and our desire to succeed is paramount in these situations. We take a leap of faith each time we start something new – a career, an educational endeavor, or a family. I know well this leap and take it with excitement and nervousness. The process of self-discovery happens internally through a series of transformations, reflections, commitments and above all faith. Through my leap of faith as a co-parent I was able to rejuvenate my faith in myself; as an individual, a partner, a mom and a friend. Reflecting on my role in my family allows me to see each person for who they are and what they bring to our family; my husband the ever present voice of reason, rationality and realism, my daughter for her trust, honesty and loyalty, my co-parent Susan for her unfaltering belief in humanity and for seeing the

good in everything, my son for his youthful jubilation and myself as the thoughtful, open hearted and diligent matriarch. We have found each other, our community, to call our own. Our collective act of faith in one another has provided us love and adventure and has challenged us to find our own sense of individuality, worth and belonging. We have been able, as Patel writes, “to see the other side, to defend another people, not despite our tradition but because of it^{xxviii}.” We want to learn from and defend each other because of our common belief in our family.

Parents in similar family situations can learn about themselves and their roles in the family through this process of self-discovery and reflection. Personal involvement has shown me that this learning comes through direct experience. We are repeatedly confronted with situations that we must deal with in one way or another. This type of social learning serves an extremely informative purpose. When we are able to reflect upon our own reactions and responses we create an opportunity to learn a little bit more about ourselves. Why do I feel inadequate when I am left out of a conversation between the other co-parents in our family? How does my reaction to my child impact their perspective of our roles? What do we each bring to the table? Who can we rely on if not each other to nurture a supportive and loving environment for our children? Is my response emotional or rational?

Asking these sort of self-regulating and self-discovering questions is how we build our own stories. Bruner believes that these stories are how we make meaning of or understand events^{xxix}. We create our own stories to make sense of confusing or challenging experiences. My story encourages and helps me to welcome the surprises, find order in the confusing, find solutions to the challenges

and appreciate the nuances of our blended family experience. I employ other parents to appreciate the value of their own experiences and to recognize the importance of reflecting on their own sense of identity and self.

CHAPTER 3: The Common Thread

3.1 The Anxious Discipline of Raising a Family

Fact 3: I find great meaning in the little nuances of our blended family. *Hypothesis:* Educators can help children in co-parenting situations appreciate the nuances in their families and find their own meaning in those experiences.

The journey of raising children is made more complex in a blended family. There is excitement, disagreement, anxiety, pleasure, sadness, and love in any family but in a blended family there is always the unspoken truth that someone is out of place. There is always at least one person who thinks they are the outsider in any given situation; they don't belong because they're not "blood related" or their relationships aren't as strong because they are different. The experience of being a co-parent in a blended family is full of adventure but it is an experiment and we *are* being evaluated on our performance.^{xxx} We are evaluated on how our family functions, if we love each other the way traditional nuclear families do, if parental roles are the same as in non-blended families and how the adult relationships impact the children. This anxious discipline of raising a family affects all parents regardless of the makeup of the family. It is up to us as parents to find meaning in our family and to encourage educators who work with our children to help the kids do the same.

One of the biggest challenges that blended families, especially the children, face is the judgment they experience or perceived judgment by peers and educators. In the early years as a blended family, we had to constantly explain that yes, it's true, the adults DO get along! We actually do care about each other and we want the best for everyone in our family. Luckily for my daughter, blended families are as common today as a stay at home mother was in the 1950's. When I was growing up this wasn't what I experienced. A close friend of mine had a blended family and I was confused; I didn't understand why her biological dad didn't live at home and how was she exactly related to her "sister" when they had different moms, and why was this man living in their house and she called him by his first name? So many questions because it wasn't the norm. I never asked any questions because I was afraid of saying something that would offend them or that I wouldn't be able to put the words exactly perfectly as I was thinking them. My confusion didn't change my relationship with my friend or her family because I just stopped thinking about it. I figured it was their family to figure out and didn't impact me.

Doing a quick count of all the blended families with children I know approaches a number in the teens; that is just my immediate circle of friends, family and co-workers. One of my daughter's best friends has a blended family on both sides of her biological parents. I mention this not to diminish the unique nature of our blended family but to highlight the fact that there are more resources available for blended families – social groups, national organizations, school counselors and educational networks – than there were in previous decades. Universities and local schools have centers focused on children and family development, state agencies have departments dedicated to families and the National Stepfamily Resource Center's primary objective is to provide information and

resources for blended families^{xxxi}. Four decades later, stepfamilies are still perplexing even those of us in them. The shadow of over idealized traditional families is silently beginning to fade and if we as parents, educators and advocates can help de-stigmatize blended families and learn from them much of what we will learn can be an eye opening experience.

Contrary to popular myth, blended families actually can be quite stable and have a high success rate in raising healthy and happy children. Children in blended families seem to have a higher rate of resilience and may be more apt and willing to talk about their feelings and find meaning in their experiences. My daughter is much more open about her feelings that I ever remember being as a teenager. We as co-parents encourage her to express herself more freely so we all know what she is experiencing. We don't rely on one another to assume or guess how our actions impact her; we just ask her. Parental conflict can be detrimental to any child but blended families who can work past their own challenges have a higher chance of working through problems with their children instead of apart from them. The first couple of years is the most challenging for blended families; mine has made it almost ten years without a major falling out. This reassures me that we are doing something right! The needs of individuals in blended families are the same as the needs of people in all families – to be accepted, loved, supported, encouraged, heard and to be visible. Educators can help parents in blended families by reassuring the children in these families that while their family makeup may be unique, their needs are just like other kids'. They are not strange or abnormal and they can be encouraged to find meaning in their own experiences through their own process.

3.2 Becoming My Best Self

Fact 4: I am a better me because of my experiences as a co-parent. *Hypothesis:* Educators and parents can help children in co-parenting families become their best selves through the experiences they have in blended families.

One of the things that is most fascinating to me about families is how they function as a social group. Families are not like other social groups; there are usually no written rules of engagement, no orientation when you join, and no annual review or tryout to see if you still make the cut to belong. Unlike sports teams or private clubs, families are made up of individuals who, whether they like it or not, usually have to be there. A resilient family can withstand hardships and overcome obstacles. The challenges that families face often test their unwritten rules and social roles but focusing on their collective strength can help families overcome obstacles.^{xxxii} The roles aren't always as clear to outsiders as to those who belong and sometimes the individuals are able to switch roles depending on the needs of the family unit.

When I was a child I remember knowing what my role was in our family; I was the middle child of three girls. My role was to help my mom and my sisters do chores around the house, which consisted of anything from cleaning the bathrooms, to doing the dishes, or putting away laundry. My sisters and I also had our very unique social roles in our family which were unspoken rules of engagement for play and learning. My older sister who had just over two years on

me played the role of protector; she was there to show us how to do things correctly, to make sure we didn't handle the cat too roughly which would lead to us getting scratched, and she also had the utmost important role of looking out for us when we played a little too close to the street. She was strong and steady and reliable. My younger sister, a mere fifteen months younger than me, was the guinea pig. Her role was to try things we weren't too sure of, whether that was food or games or asking mom for that extra cookie. She was brave and silly and always happy to help out in our little social triad. This role did not come without consequences, including one very bad haircut that she allowed me to give her simply because I told her it would be awesome!

My role as the middle child seemed to fluctuate on any given day. Sometimes I had the role of the explorer who was willing to put my body to the test to find a new climbing tree. Other times I was the do-gooder who wanted to please mom and dad so badly that I would do every chore they left for us just for the praise. I was adventurous and stubborn and determined. Our roles were fluid and there were times when those lines between protector and test subject and adventurer were blurred but we all played our part in the construction and maintenance of our family's organization.

The common thread that bound us and connected us to one another was that we were family. There was no further explanation given or needed. There was never any doubt that we all belonged, except for the occasional taunt by my older sister that I was perhaps the milk man's child because of my abnormally white blond hair and crystal blue eyes (unlike my sisters' dark hair and eyes). We borrowed each other's clothes, locked one another out of our rooms, and fought over who was going to pick the television show. Our parents loved us and challenged us and played referee for us. As a child, I found

meaning in these interactions and in my role in our family. It gave my life purpose and I never questioned my membership to this special club.

Now as a co-parent I reflect on my own childhood experiences and wonder if my children feel the same way about our family. Does my stepdaughter feel this way about our family? Does she view William any differently than I viewed my sisters? Are her dad and I providing the same unconditional love and belonging to our family to her that I experienced? I hope the answer is yes, but I fear it is more honest to say “sometimes.” I believe my children have benefited greatly from being in a blended family. My daughter’s biological mother, Susan, says our children have “experienced true love, acceptance, forgiveness, selflessness and the truest sense of family^{xxxiii}.” Our children’s extended family has grown exponentially and they have learned that differences in personality and life experiences doesn’t change how much love they have to share.

I am a better “me” because of my blended family. I have learned, much like our children, to accept, forgive and to put my ego aside to let our family grow and change. Susan told me that my husband’s and my genuine love for our daughter created “genuine love” for us in her own heart. Other parents and educators can be reassured that efforts to foster the growth of a child in a blended family does take a lot of patience but it can result in amazing relationships. They can see their best-selves as a result of their experiences in their families and their work with blended families. Parenting and educating takes respect on multiple levels. Despite feelings of jealousy, anger, fear or confusion both parents and educators can learn to deal with issues unique to blended families through

personal narratives, providing information or support and just knowing that communication and problem-solving are techniques that can always help.

As a co-parent in my family I have learned more about myself and my family than I ever thought possible. I have learned that there is more than one right way to parent and sometimes my way is *not* the best way. The unexpected will happen and you may not be prepared; that's ok. The first few years is the hardest but if you're committed you'll weather the storm better. Most of the time "it's not personal" is actually true. You have to have thick skin to survive and thrive in a blended family; they aren't made for the emotionally fragile. Learning to be a gracious loser is a life saver. If you can figure out how to love your children *and* your co-parents your family will be unbreakable. One should never underestimate the power of self-discovery, reflection and identity. If you don't know who you are you will get lost.

3.3 The Power of Kindness in Unpleasant Moments

Isn't it amazing how we can love someone so much yet fight with them like they are our worst enemy? I remember fighting with my older sister constantly when we were growing up. She was always trying to tell me what to do and how to act and I just plain didn't like that. We would yell, punch, kick, and scream until our mother finally put an end to it – until the next day. To this day I remember those fights as epic. We hated each other. We went down that path regularly yet somehow we always managed to still be there for each other. Our anger was never long lasting because we knew that we were family and that was more important than arguing over who stole whose shirt.

When I became a co-parent I was warned by people who had been in similar parenting situations to be careful; your stepdaughter will hate you and resent that her parents aren't together, her mother will be unkind and try to break you and your boyfriend/husband up, your husband will not let you give any help or advice on raising *his* daughter. I heeded these warnings with caution and was determined not to have that be my experience. Even before I met my soon to be stepdaughter and her mother, I knew that it was important for my boyfriend to know that if it ever came down to it, his daughter was top priority and that I, and our relationship, was to never stand in the way. At that time she still lived out of state with her mother, but if ever a time came for her to be more present in our lives I knew I had a lot to learn.

The first time I met Taylor she was 8 years old. I walked into the house with nervous anticipation. The first thing I heard was an upbeat, young, squeaky voice say, "Bethany, is that you?" I will never forget the feeling that came over me when I heard this. Taylor was genuinely excited to see me. There she stood a petite gangly child with big brown eyes and blond playful hair. Her eyes were open wide with surprise and her smile went from ear to ear. How could this adorable little girl bring any judgment, hate, or resentment with her? She was so joyful and innocent and for this I was grateful. In these fleeting first moments what I saw in Taylor's eyes was not challenge as a stepparent but of hope; hope for a strong and open relationship with Taylor, hope for an even stronger sense of belonging with Adam, and hope for a kind relationship with Taylor's mother.

The last ten years has not been without its challenges or unpleasant moments. These teaching moments, as I like to refer to them, are moments when we learn about ourselves and about those we love. What I learn from these experiences is that our children rely on us to protect them in more ways than one. At such a young age, Taylor wasn't able to comprehend her parents' history or why they made the decision to live apart. Her mother didn't shield Taylor from her own feelings with regard to Adam and this led to Taylor interpreting these in her own way. Our role as parents and educators is to help our children understand their own feelings without putting our own biases on them. As parents we want to protect our children from anything that could harm them physically or emotionally; this is not always possible. As educators we aim to give our students the most information we can so they can learn to use it wisely and make informed decisions.

I believe that if we all stop to think, it is clear that we depend on acts of kindness all the time. We make our lives meaningful by filling them with people, adventures, memories, and knowledge that somehow provide us with a lasting sense of satisfaction. Six years ago I was unexpectedly let go from my job. This came as a total shock to me. Since it had nothing to do with my performance there was no forewarning. The organization was eliminating positions – mine being one of them. I was hurt, embarrassed, angry and worried. In the weeks following this moment of absolute stress and angst I experienced one of the kindest actions by my co-mother/parent. She presented me a small token of appreciation, respect, and love – a necklace. It wasn't extravagant or elaborate but it was beautiful. She gave it to me to cheer me up but also to reassure me that in dark times there is beauty and when one door shuts another opens. I wear this

necklace regularly. Whenever I see it I am reminded that the common thread in our family, the one that helps me be my best self is the opportunity we are given to show kindness to one another.

3.4 A Letter to My Children

Building trust as the non-biological parent in a blended family takes a lot of time, energy and patience. One way I tried to build this trust with my daughter was by telling her and showing her that I would love, support and protect her no matter what; she is my child – biological or not. Neither of us is fantastic about talking about our feelings but what we do express works for us. That expression sometimes comes in nonverbal ways; a hug or a smile, helping with homework or being the shoulder to cry on. I have always found writing to be an easier way to express my inner most feelings as compared to verbally telling someone how I feel. I also love writing letters. My sisters and I used to write cards and letters to our grandma all the time. It's a very unique, personal and thoughtful approach to meaning-making for me.

When I was introduced to the Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN) style of writing I was immediately hooked. What a neat concept! Writing a letter to someone to share something personal all the while showing them that I had done my research; my thoughts and words on the paper were from the heart *and* mind! I found it easier to keep the “I” at the center through this style and it allowed me to be freer with my feelings. My messages could be instructive yet emotional and personal. I could write to anyone I wanted and it didn't matter if they actually saw the letter. Writing an eSPN, I found, was a way for me to share with others what I was learning even if they had never

heard the terms “meaning-making” or “Scholarly Personal Narrative” writing. This style of writing helped me focus on my own reflections and ideas in the hopes of adding some new aspect of knowledge or understanding to who I was writing.

My first attempt at an eSPN (a letter in the SPN form) was written to my son, William. I wrote to him knowing that he would probably never read it. I wrote it with fierce love, affection, and doubt as a parent. For the purpose of this SPN I have changed the letter slightly to be more generalizable. The feelings that this letter brings out in me as a parent is universal to both my children. I wrote the letter in the hopes that it would shed some light on my doubts and hesitations as a parent. Children do not come with an instruction manual. They are basically a blank slate and we figure out along the way what we think is best for them. We don't always understand why we do things or why we parent the way we do but writing this letter felt like a weight was being lifted off my shoulders. I am afraid and I am in a hurry. I am not always patient with my children and I am not always right. I hope other parents find comfort in knowing that our actions speak as loud if not louder than words and my desire is for educators to see a parent's perspective on the challenges we face.

My sweet child,

From the minute I met you I knew my whole world was going to change. I was eager with anticipation to see you, to hear you, and to get to know you. I started practicing and relearning what it meant to be patient from the day I found out you were coming into my life. The philosopher Piero Ferrucci says that patience is just a different perception of time. He describes time as something that devours and envelopes us, in

which we can lose ourselves and that which takes meaning out of life. Our lives would be forever joined and every day since I am reminded that time is constructed by us and there is no need to be in a hurry because every minute counts. “There is no need to be afraid or to be in a hurry, because nothing is running away from us^{xxxiv}.”

The idea that patience is a way of being kind to oneself and to each other is a concept that I struggle with daily. I recognize that I often lack patience with you and that is something that weighs heavily on me. As a parent, I want to show you what it means to be kind. I want to practice what I preach and patience as a virtue of kindness is not easy for me to model. I just recently began examining where my impatience comes from and it has dawned on me that my mind is calmer and clearer when I interact with you with just a little more patience. I am most assuredly more kind when I approach you with patience. My lack of patience is an internal reaction to external forces. I feel rushed in almost everything I do these days – at home, at work, in school. There is always something that needs to get done; a meal that needs to be cooked, chores to be finished, work that needs to be finished, or play time to be enjoyed. I have this overwhelming sense of time based on what needs to be done and how long “that” (whatever “that” is) will take. There is just not enough time for everything that needs to be done, should be done, or could be done, let alone what I want to do.

For you, I’m separating myself as a mom out from myself as an employee, a student, or an individual because to you, my dearest child, my role as your guardian is the most important role of our lives. Everyone says kids grow up so fast but until I stop and think of all that we’ve done together and all that we’ll still do, it doesn’t seem possible. The unexpected benefit of being a parent is all that I have learned from you. You don’t

even know it yet but in your short life, you have taught me more than I could ever have imagined. You have taught me how to laugh freely, love unconditionally, and “to face without fear the incessant flow of time^{xxxv}.” You have shown me how to capture with patience those moments of timelessness in our daily lives and through those moments we are being kind to one another. There will never be enough time for us because I can never get enough of you. So I’m learning, with your help, to understand and respect the perception of time knowing that for every one thing we don’t get accomplished, there is something that we have. Living in the present with patience and forgiving ourselves and each other when our impatience gets the better of us is how we can lead compassionate lives together.

When we can forgive ourselves and others for wrong doings we are being kind. Out of love we forgive because it is our way of “making peace with the past and of finally closing accounts^{xxxvi}.” In a moment of forgiveness, I am able to be kind to myself and to you. It may seem illogical but it’s really quite simple; I feel uplifted by knowing that I am free of resentment and you are free of worry. We have been through a lot in our short time together. Our relationship is very intense and wonderful and it is riddled with forgiveness; a broken toe, a broken vase, stern words by me, or unkind words spoken by you. We can only continue to enjoy the present if we don’t live in the past. Ferrucci describes resentment as a burden that we must not bare in order to be truly kind to one another:

“We cannot be kind while we carry the weight of our resentments. Nor while we remain too rigid to ask forgiveness. Nor if our emotions are colored by guilt or vindictiveness^{xxxvii}.”

I admit that when I use harsh words with you I feel immediate and immense pains of guilt. I start to question my validity and value as a parent. Forgiving myself is much harder than it is to forgive you. I wonder if it will always be this way. Is forgiveness always possible? When you are having a hard morning and I have to rush off to work leaving you behind with tears in your eyes, and all you want is one more hug – do you forgive me for walking out the door? When I tell you that you can’t have peanut butter and jelly for dinner for the fourth night in a row – do you forgive me? I suppose it’s all relative. In a way those seemingly minor instances of forgiveness teach us both how to forgive in our own ways. We are learning together the value of forgiveness yet another unexpected benefit of leading a compassionate life, for through our forgiveness of one another we are being kind. I don’t think we have reached a point where forgiveness is something we are, but every time we find it in ourselves to forgive we are one step closer.

When we are patient with each other, and forgive ourselves for our moments of impatience, we are giving ourselves and each other the space and freedom to be ourselves in our most imperfect ways; we are learning to be flexible. Ferrucci explains that flexibility is a spiritual quality. He says that “it implies freedom from attachment, wakefulness in the present, acceptance of what is^{xxxviii}.” The changes that happen when

you become a parent – physically and emotionally – are frightening but in order to be kind to myself and to you I needed to adapt. I had to let go of my predetermined identity and start all over again. By giving myself the space to change I was being kind to myself. This space to change is always around us but we often let it slip away without a second glance. Change is inevitable in life; the only constant is change. Affording ourselves the opportunity to change, the space to grow, and the chance to be kind and compassionate to ourselves and to others is something that kids and adults alike are challenged with.

I watch you change and grow every day and I want to give you the space to be what and who you want to be. I want to give you the space to succeed and fail, to be unsure and confident in your experiences, and to discover all there is to know about yourself and others. The way I see it, sweetheart, you have all the time in the world to discover how best to be kind to yourself. This will change often. I am just figuring out how to be kind to myself – and I've been trying for years! It's not easy to be kind to oneself; I think it's actually easier to be kind to others. We judge ourselves, hold ourselves to the highest of standards, and ridicule ourselves for not living up to our own expectations. I promise you that I will choose to be kind to myself and help you do the same.

Through patience, forgiveness, and flexibility we will survive and thrive together and apart. I believe in the power of patience to get us through our toughest situations. I believe in the inner act of forgiveness to live in the present. I believe in the flow and adaptability of flexibility to wake us and allow us to accept what is. All of these reveal to us who we are. It will not be easy, and at times we will fail. We will face opposition both internally and from others but we owe it to ourselves to try. What I want to make sure

you learn from me and from this letter, is that as you're learning how to be patience, to forgive, and to be flexible, so am I. Parents don't always know what they're doing – I know I don't. Each time you and I interact I'm learning and trying to figure things out. My way of being kind to you is to listen to you, share with you, learn with you, and love you. I guarantee that we will never regret being patient or being kind to one another.

You're biggest show of kindness these days is sharing – your toys, your food, your hugs and your time. It is my job to share my patience with you, to show you forgiveness, and for us both to be flexible. There are opportunities for kindness all around us. Each person is kind and shows kindness in their own way. Kindness is a way for us to be free from things that may weigh us down or obstacles that hinder our personal growth. If we practice patience, forgiveness, and flexibility with each other we will begin to learn a lot. I love you to the moon and back.

With love and kindness,

Mommy

CHAPTER 4: SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

4.1 Lessons for Parents

I love my family. I have to say that because it is not always apparent when I talk about my experiences as a co-parent in a blended family. We don't always get along but we all truly love one another with all our hearts. We would go to the ends of the earth for each other. We protect, care for, laugh with, yell at, and play with each other. Our family story is being written every day. It consists of ups and

downs and plateaus. The plateaus are important because they are what helps sustain and maintain our bond. The ups remind us of why we value each other and our family and the downs remind us that no one is perfect. Our family is amazing because in all of this we remind each other that we are building our story together. They are my “why” for writing this narrative and for encouraging educators and parents to find meaning in their own experiences.

My experience as a co-parent has shown me that the relationships within blended families not only impact the children but also the adults, both directly and indirectly. The family processes and individual outcomes vary by situation, but the heart of my philosophy is that couples and families who promote healthy couple and co-parenting relationships among adults, self-discovery for individuals and exploration and clarity of role identification will encourage social and emotional competence and success among children. You might be asking yourself what this might mean for you.

The educational role that parents play is a major component of a child’s development – socially, emotionally and physically. Education can be defined as “the act or process of rearing or bringing up” and “the process of providing with knowledge, skill, competence or usually desirable qualities of behavior and character^{xxxix}.” While the majority of a child’s formal education is spent in places other than the home, parent behavior, attitudes and actions speak volumes for how the child will view themselves over their lifetime. As awareness of the role of the parent in the child’s education and development grows, so, too, does the lack of clarity on what this means for blended families. The combination of multiple parents in a blended family makes role clarification a necessity; do all three (or four) parents have the same pull? Maybe not the

same but all important. Our co-parenting has taught our daughter to seek advice and guidance but that her opinions matter just as much as ours. This is a huge message that I believe all educators and parents should teach their children. That their opinions matter. Their thoughts and feelings and actions are just as important in a family as the adult's. Our blended family is a perfect example of how individual opinions shape the family dynamic.

Communicative challenges are often associated with blended families and may be accompanied by feelings of distress and anxiety. Soon after my daughter moved in with her dad and me when she was nine she was having a hard time with her own feelings of anxiety and had difficulty expressing herself. She would retreat into her room and would not talk to us about what she was thinking or how she was feeling. She would become sullen and defensive and distant. We encouraged her to talk to us; it wasn't easy but it improved once she realized that we, our family, was strong and stable and we were not going anywhere. I wasn't going anywhere – that was the sticking point. She had been let down a lot in her young life. Adults would make promises to her and break them. They would tell her they would take her places or spend time with her and cancel. This was a pivotal moment for me as a new parent. I vowed that day to always keep my promises to Taylor and to never ever make a promise I can't keep.

4.2 Using Narrative to Encourage: Implications for Educators

Children use narrative communication to reconstruct their experiences. Sharing their experiences encourages children to reflect upon them and validates their feelings

and is a highly social means of “evaluating, thinking, learning, remembering, coping and handling or overcoming stress.”^{xi} It is through these experiences that educators and parents can help them make sense of them. It’s a constant give and take between children, their memories, and their reality of experience. We as parents and educators need to help children explore their narrative to put intent behind their experiences.^{xli} I have learned that one of my roles as a co-parent is to help my children see the intent behind their memories. Their memories, like them, are all unique and special and relevant to their story and personal experiences. Students sometimes feel like their voices aren’t being heard but when educators ask for their perspective it helps the students feel validated and are more likely to be proactive about their learning and engagement^{xlii}.

Concepts drawn from narratives can be used to examine how the social status of blended families impact parenting roles, children’s feelings of worth and belonging and how children and parents in blended families still continue to feel marginalized and stigmatized. Narratives help us weave pieces of our lives into a whole picture. As Bruner describes in his study on human experience, we make meaning through stories so they cannot be seen as real or literal – it’s our personal perspective and what we glean from them that matter^{xliii}. Narratives are continuously changing and are imbedded in our social, emotional, and cultural definitions of who we are and what our relationships mean. Educators have much to learn from the children in blended families; their stories are examples of how they determine their roles, push back against marginalization and fight stigma about being part of a non-biologically traditional nuclear family. Social and community environments do not always support blended families. Even the closest relationships can be strained by new relationships, roles and expectations when families

join or separate^{xliv}. The role of stepparents are burdened by negative myths and blended families lack clear rules on how to adjust and defend their experiences^{xlv}.

The diversity of blended families presents a unique opportunity for educators to talk about relationships and roles in families. Families are their own micro-societies that exhibit language, values, ideologies and systems unique to them. Characteristics that are common in communities and societies exhibit differently in blended families and the underlying principles of why these features vary are far more important than the characteristics themselves. Families adapt and grow based on their relationships within family members but also in response to their environment. These elements exist in direct response to the families' needs and desires^{xlvi}. Educators can understand the differences in adjustment and address problems by examining how the composition of families affects children's well-being and how their experiences impact their perspectives on relationships. Adolescents from blended families often experience higher levels of missed school and lower academic performance^{xlvii}. Educators can help students in blended families work through the process of separation or the joining of their family by teaching problem-solving techniques, communication skills, pointing out the student's strengths, being active listeners and focusing on things the student can control (i.e. behavior in response to feelings). These are practical ways that educators can support students through emotional and often challenging transitions^{xlviii}.

Variations in family structure and the formation of blended families are important aspects for educators to consider. Family systems respond to changes in relationships among members and these can have a considerable impact on the overall elements of the system. Behavior problems and educational difficulties can be attributed to when and

how a child's family separated or blended, feelings of solidarity among and between family members, pressures that children may feel to accept their new family structure and tensions created by changing family dynamics can put both children and parents on edge^{xlix}. Adjustment problems might be linked to factors that are more common in blended families than in traditional nuclear families; variation in the level of parental involvement among multiple adults, role clarification and the consideration of the physical space a child calls home. The makeup of the blended family (how many parents and children are blended), the mental health of the parents in response to the separation or joining of partners, the quality of the parent-child relationships, how many physical transitions the children must make (living at one parents' house during the week and another on the weekend) and the relationships the children in a blended family have with one another are all crucial considerations for educators to assess when working with children in blended families.

All parts of family social systems are linked and the nature of these interconnected systems ensures a substantial degree of variance when one or multiple parts changes. Each change warrants the need for other areas to adapt and creates the possibility for additional changes. Understanding this concept and how the process of change impacts family members, specifically children, can influence the way educators work with children to confront alternative ways of addressing their needs and goals in a changing system. Family systems are imperfect and the degree to which family members and educators respond to changes will influence the progress or regression of the family.

So when do parents stop managing their families and start participating in the adventure? As a co-parent I have struggled with this question frequently. There is a fine

line between parenting and managing, or even acting like a parent or a friend to your children. Parents in blended families face this challenge more intensely than other families simply by nature of their relationships to one another. Educators can encourage children to work with their families to determine how they can collectively deal with the changes and how to accept and appreciate the differences. These interactions among parents, educators and children can enhance the learning of everyone involved and increase meaningful relationships and individual development.

4.3 Not a Parent, Not an Educator: The Significance for Everyone Else

How does someone who is not a parent, not part of a blended family and not an educator working with blended families relate to my narrative? What are the implications for my colleagues, neighbors or those associated with other blended families? The fact that blended families make up more than 50% of American families means that the chances of you knowing someone who is part of a blended family is pretty high¹. The relatability factor alone reassures me that my narrative is worth reading (and writing). All families have challenges regardless of the makeup. All families are different, unique, personal and constantly changing. I may not know what it's like to live in a family with biracial, upper class, multilingual or same-gendered parents but that doesn't mean I don't want to know more about these families. It's simply a matter of understanding my peers, neighbors, family, and friends in a way that makes us more empathetic and understanding to one another.

Understanding others is part of being human. We are social creatures and are drawn to one another in order to understand each other's stories. Listening to my

narrative will allow other people who may not be in a blended family understand how our family is just like theirs; we fight and problem solve, we laugh together and at each other, we raise our kids in the best ways we know how and we try our best to support each other. The dynamics of families can be vastly unique but the bottom line is this is true in all families – blended or traditionally nuclear.

A few months ago my daughter graduated high school. She struggled through her senior year anxiously and was impatient, eager to be done with school and to move on to the next chapter of her life. She didn't know if she wanted to go to college or get a job. As parents we tried to encourage her to weigh her options, look at schools, to check out internships and jobs. I wanted desperately to fill out applications for her, make connections through my networks and walk her through every college essay. I wanted to make it easy for her and help her in every way I could. My co-parents and I all had own opinions on what we thought was best for our daughter and what we thought would open up the best opportunities but we had to trust that we did the best we could for the last eighteen years; her life is her own to screw up now! These feelings and this experience is not unique to us because we are a blended family. It is an absolutely normal and expected stage in our lives as our children grow up. We ask ourselves the same questions other parents do – there just happens to be three of us asking those questions instead of two. We have the same discussions about how we can support our children as they grow up, move out, succeed, fail and come back to us for help. That is what makes us a ~~blended~~ family.

One of my very closest friends is part of a blended family. I have known this friend for the better part of a decade. Before I was a parent in a blended family I was her

friend. She shared with me her experiences in a blended family and really helped shed some light on the nuances that come with this type of family. Just because I wasn't part of a blended family didn't mean I didn't want to know about hers; knowing more about her family and her experiences helped me understand her. I understood why holidays were not days she looked forward to and why planning her wedding was a nightmare. She helped me to understand why she appreciated loyalty, trust and honesty in her relationships and why she welcomed people into her life so easily, like they were family regardless of blood relation. I hope that by sharing my narrative I have helped readers understand a little bit more about me the way my friend helped me understand her. Through insight we gain understanding that can lead us to being better friends, parents, educators, neighbors and human beings.

COMPREHENSIVE PERSONAL REFLECTION

I wrote this letter to Robert as part of my comprehensive exam for the program. I wanted to include it in my thesis because I think it's important to know why I started exploring SPN writing and how it impacted my writing and my willingness to explore new methods for expressing myself and sharing my story. The initial charge was to write a letter explained why I decided to enter the Interdisciplinary Studies Program and to also describe what I got out of the program; what it has done for me personally and professionally. It turns out that this last piece of self-reflection was probably the most therapeutic and purposeful exploration of self-discovery and meaning making of the entire process. It allowed me to think only about me; my original goals, the challenges I

thought I would face as well as the opportunities that being in the program presented to me.

Dear Robert,

Before my tenure as a working professional, I was enrolled in a graduate program, other than the Interdisciplinary Studies program, that shall remain nameless. I was fresh out of college, young and eager to move up the proverbial ladder. I wanted my job and my career to be impressive and meaningful even though I wasn't sure what that career was going to be. I thought I needed an advanced degree to figure that out, yet I did not have a clear understanding of what I was searching for personally, academically or professionally. The program I chose to enroll in at the time suited me well enough for what it was – a typical course of study that would take me through standard requirements, complete with research courses culminating in the foreboding and ever-looming threat of a large cumbersome quantitatively-based research thesis at the end. The courses were predetermined so each semester I knew which courses I would take and the professors and other students were kind and smart and all the bit academia-like. Truthfully I didn't feel like I really belonged in that program or with those students.

In the beginning of my first graduate program I was excited at the idea of being a graduate student. I felt like I found this secret little society and I was a member of an exclusive club. Whenever anyone outside the University asked me what I did, I would proudly reply, "I'm a graduate student" and wait for their wide-eyed reaction. Oh it's so impressive to be a graduate student. People are so impressed by your motivation, your eagerness to learn, your drive for excellence and your desire to improve yourself. As a

graduate student you *must* want to make the world a better place and participate in phenomenally complex and momentous research that impacts the world and moves mountains. As a graduate student your work *must* be highly scientific, detailed and hard to understand by anyone who is not in your same field of study. Right? Isn't that what being a graduate student and getting an advanced degree is all about? Impressing people with what you could, should, might do someday? That's what it felt like. I felt like I was acting as a graduate student for all the wrong reasons.

I was eager to learn and wanted to make myself and my community a better place but I didn't want to do it in a way that someone else told me I had to. I wanted to figure that out for myself. By the end of my first full year as a graduate student, I had become academically ambivalent, bored and anxious. I was already looking forward to being done. The program was no longer working for me; I was working for the program. I was doing the coursework and the research that other people told me I should do and that my peers were doing, but I found no real excitement or meaning in it. I found myself thinking about my life as a graduate student and questioning how it was preparing me for my professional career. The honest answer was that I didn't feel it was preparing me but I also didn't know exactly what I was supposed to be preparing for! Before I figured out how I wanted to improve myself or my community, I needed to figure out where and how I found the most meaning, which communities I wanted to be more involved in and what I thought were my strengths as an individual.

As an undergraduate student I found that I made the most meaning out of classes that integrated many aspects of life and learning instead of following a single path of focus. Service learning experiences and classes heavy with discussion had the most

impact on me because they allowed me to draw from my own experiences and knowledge to positively impact and relate to the class as a whole. The classes where everyone was actively engaged helped me make meaning out of the connections that brought people together. This made for a very dynamic and engaged learning experience that showed me the need for understanding the relationship between and among disciplines. These early learning experiences also impressed upon me the need for high level meaningful interaction between community members – the members of our learning communities, whether it be in the classroom, lab or out in the community at an off-campus site. The other characteristic of the classes that I enjoyed the most were the ones where there was little hierarchy; the professors were members of the community just like the students. This not only made the students feel comfortable but also provided a richer learning experience because the professor was learning from the students. This multidimensional way of learning and communicating opened my eyes to how education should be – fun!

I have always been good with people. I would describe myself as a natural leader, a reflective listener and an effective communicator. My first professional experience after I went through the painful realization that I was in graduate school for all the wrong reasons was working directly with people in a high-level administrative role for a local non-profit agency. I had financial, supervisory and creative responsibilities. I was able to interact with a variety of individuals on many levels and found it to be an extremely challenging and rewarding experience. It was in this role that I was able to be honest with myself for the first time as an adult and a working professional, and determine that I wanted to continue my work in an administrative capacity. I found a renewed energy to

search for a graduate program that would help me move forward professionally, while being simultaneously rewarding in its own right.

The Interdisciplinary Studies (IS) program first came to my attention while I was searching for my next academic adventure. I was talking with a colleague about their academic background and she told me that she was in a program that was tailored to her particular interests. My colleague spoke highly of the program because she was taking classes that appealed to her, that were relevant to her professional aspirations and was flexible to meet her needs as her schedule (both personally and professionally) changed. To be honest, at first I wasn't convinced because I had known other programs that started this way but ended up being regimented and strict in curriculum with no flexibility which is not what I was looking for. I needed a program that would fit my schedule, my life and help me achieve my academic and professional goals.

I was looking for a course of study where my professional life was the driving factor in determining which classes I would take but that would also accommodate my personal interests and goals. I really didn't want to take another Introduction to Psychology class or fulfill a lab science requirement; I am not nor do I plan to be a Psychologist, Social Worker, Lab Technician or Science teacher. I am an educator, an administrator, a leader and (recently claimed) writer. The courses I wanted to take had to impact me in those roles in order for me to be interested in the program. The courses I would take all had one requirement: to be meaningful in some way to my personal and professional growth. I tell you now, Robert, as I near the end of my M.Ed. experience in the IS program, I can honestly say that this has held true for me during the entire program.

The first class I took that fulfilled a requirement on my quest for my Master's challenged me to really think about what being an educator meant to me. I am not a classroom teacher but I do work in higher education. I'm also a parent. The combination of these two roles is what helps me identify as an educator. I believe all parents are educators in the truest sense of the word. We try to encourage, teach, listen to and help our children in every way we know how. Sometimes that means teaching them to tie their shoes, reading with them, working through homework with them and showing them how to be a good friend. Other times parents as educators help their children grow by giving them space to grow and experience things in their own way on their own terms. The entire experience of educating comes in many forms and we often are learning at the same time we think we are teaching.

Asking ourselves as learners and educators, we are asking ourselves, our students and our children to constantly rethink and reevaluate our role in education and their role in society. This allows us to make our knowledge work for us. We must have the courage to do this and to model this for our students at every age and stage of their learning. We should challenge the traditional notion of education. The desire to challenge the status quo and realize that educational opportunities are everywhere is a large part of what progressive ideologies teaches us. The idea that learning happens everywhere is a modern response to a very traditional style of education. Learning is fluid and our education system is changing to accommodate and respond to financial, societal, demographic, and cultural changes. Education has traditionally been boxed into a brick and mortar setting but is starting to be challenged as globalization, changes in populations and technology changes. No population is self-sufficient just as the education system is

not self-sufficient or self-sustaining. Our populations and our education system rely on the interconnectedness and fluidity of others to sustain, grow, and advance both in complexity, depth, and understanding. To some parents and educators, traditional schools are killing creativity and independence of thought. Liberation comes when we recognize these variations and correlations and make them work for us as learners, educators and parents.

It is my perspective that we should view and use our education as a means of freedom. The education system as we know it was designed with a different type of student in mind. A more progressive approach, one that recognizes that today's students fundamentally communicate and think and process information differently will make learning a more effective means of sharing and expressing ideas among active participants. Today's students, of which my children are included, want to be integrated and diverse as a student body – they want to experience a blended curriculum and educational experience.. They want non-traditional paths in their educational experience and they want to be fully participatory in determining their own outcomes. Shouldn't we all want to feel stronger and braver after learning, interacting and engaging? We should all be so bold as to confront the status quo and tackle challenges, understanding that parameters are always changing. As a parent I hope I encourage my children to reach for the stars in their universe and as a learner myself I am grateful to be part of a program where I feel stronger and braver for being a participant.

I mentioned earlier that one of the most important aspects of a graduate program for me was the flexibility in programming. Part of this was due to my hectic schedule as a full time working parent and also because incorporating my other love, running, into my

life takes time and dedication. The course variety and flexibility of the IS program spoke to me because of the way I learn. The way students learn, what subject material is relevant to them and what methods are best used to teach them are key aspects of the education system in the US. While it is easy to recognize some of the ways our students (and I include myself in this population) have changed, it's not as easy to determine how our educational system is changing to accommodate them. By recognizing and discussing the changes in our student body then we will be able to reinvent how to educate them. I feel I was able to reinvent and rediscover how I learn during my graduate studies.

Societies and cultures transform all the time. Changes in weather patterns, availability of resources, economic, political and technological changes impact societies on a recurring level. Whether they adapt to these changes determines if and how societies thrive or dive. As an educator and parent, I feel it is my job to help those I teach (at this point primarily my children and also, in some ways, my professional peers and colleagues) understand these changes. In order to do so, I need to speak their language. Students today spend hours connected to each other and to their society through technology. They are no longer just watching television; they are online surfing the web, tweeting, using instant messaging, social media and blogging. Not only do they spend their free time differently but they learn and process information differently than students from previous generations. They are, in a sense, fundamentally different through the changes we've seen in technology.

The language this generation of students speaks is very technical and digital. They communicate in fact so differently that it is often hard to determine how to communicate with them. So the question becomes not "if" we should learn their language, but how to

learn it. Anyone who has not grown up texting, blogging or IMing may not understand how dependent today's students are on technology. Students not only expect to be able to connect and use the internet for their personal use, they expect that it will be a part of their learning experiences, too. Doing research for a history assignment no longer requires hours in the library reading books and journals. Learning algebra and calculus no longer hinges on the ability to do problem after problem in a paper workbook.

The problem with our current school system is that it is often slow to change to respond to social changes like the increased use of media and technology in learning. This makes learning the language and communication very challenging. In order to accommodate the changes in learning styles and expectations of our students we as educators need to be willing to reinvent, not necessarily from scratch, methods of teaching and our own expectations of our students and the education system. Several of the courses I had the opportunity to take while in the IS program allowed me to re-learn these modern methods of communication and reminded me of how differently everyone learns. I was reminded of this as a student and as a peer during my time in the program.

One of the ways in which I had a chance to revisit my learning style was through my writing. I have always thought I was a pretty good writer; something I've practiced in personal and professional settings on many occasions. I wrote in a journal sporadically or business letters or emails for work, but writing as a means of expressing myself or sharing a story was never my "go to" method of relaxing or reflecting. I'm a doer. I run, I play, I jump, I dance and I cook. I love all of these things because when my body is moving my mind seems to be still. It's like all the things that are jumbled up in my mind can slowly start to separate and exist independently of one another and then I can start to

understand each of them as their own topic. I have found that writing has started to do this for me. All of the white noise disappears as I write. I am focused and engaged and determined. I sort of re-learned how to write and what that means for me.

You asked our writing class, Robert, if we consider ourselves writers. The overwhelming majority of our class said no, or “sometimes” at best. I was a “no” response at the beginning of the semester. We spent a lot of time during that semester talking about the topic of our writing, the meaning behind it and how the writing process was going for us. I found this whole process to be very informative and methodical. It was one of the ways you encouraged us to be thoughtful and reflective. So often during those times of discussion an idea or a clarifying thought would pop into my head and I would jot down a note or two to come back to during my writing. It was like brainstorming and editing out loud. I felt like I was actually learning again, not just being told to memorize statistics or ideas. They were my ideas that I was encountering and getting to share with others. This experience really helped me work through my ideas and put them on paper.

I believe true education incorporates our desire to grow emotionally, scientifically, socially and creatively. Educating the whole self through traditional and modern forms and experiences is how education can become a process rather than a preparation. I think of this often when I look at my children. My education level and goals vary greatly from that of my children but we are all learning in our own ways. My daughter is learning how her educational choices and actions from the past eight years have impacted her learning habits and interests as well as how those experiences are changing her long-term goals while my son is very much focused on the absolute present

(who am I going to play with today and what will we do?). My learning is goal oriented but personally and professionally driven. My hope for my children is that they will have the opportunities to learn in a way that satisfies their needs and helps them achieve their goals, much like I have.

William Yeats once said, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” I am personally, professionally, and emotionally excited to have had the opportunity to relight the fire underneath me as I embarked on this academic adventure. My undergraduate experience at an interdisciplinary institution and my professional work in the years that followed began to prepare me for the Interdisciplinary Studies program but the experiences I have had academically and professionally since enrolling in the IS program prepared me for the next stages in my professional and personal life. I will continue to strengthen my understanding of multiple disciplines and design my own path, much as I have designed my program, that will allow me to reach my personal and professional goals; not just to fill the bucket with a degree, but to feel the heat from the fire along with way. I aim to be a knowledgeable leader, an effective community member, and a thoughtful administrator. Above all I will strive to be a strong individual, engaged parent, kind partner, understanding friend and patient colleague as I move meaningfully through my life.

Humbly,

Bethany

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- ⁱ Nash, R. & Dammann, A. (2012). *EDFS 302: Philosophy of Education*. Syllabus, pages 4-6.
This syllabus was my first exposure to SPN writing. Re-reading this for the purpose of referencing the description for my thesis really brought home the whole point of this style of writing for me: to tell my story and that it actually matters. It was a clear and concise way of describing the highlights of SPN writing and how it can be used in many different ways. The commitment from Robert and Annalee to find our truth in our writing and to believe that our stories are important enough to read (and to write about) helped build my confidence as a student and writer. This piece of writing, the syllabus, also showed me how writing can be creative and personal – it doesn't have to be frigid and impersonal. I felt challenged by this new style of writing to stand up for what I believe in. I was able to reflect upon that to bring together a couple of themes in my thesis: family, trust and self-discovery. These are things I truly believe in and was able to use SPN writing to describe them.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Nash, R. & Viray, S. (2014). *EDFS 309: Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) Writing*. Syllabus, pages 5-7.
- ^{iv} Walsh, W. (1992). Twenty major issues in remarriage families. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 70, 709-715.
The notion that blended or mixed families are becoming the dominant family structure speaks volumes to what I'm trying to describe in my thesis. Our family is not weird or different. We are not the outliers anymore. This article highlighted the fact that more and more families are joining in any number of ways and for many reasons – divorce is only one of them. This article speaks to the complexity of families in a way that responds to issues all families face, not just blended families. Walsh explains that even in traditional nuclear families, self-identity, discipline, love between family members and competition between siblings arises. These are all significant factors in how a family functions and supports itself. This article outlines these issues and describes how families can explore potential solutions to encourage positive growth.
- ^v Parker, K. (2011). *A Portrait of Stepfamilies*. Pew Research Center report.
<http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/01/13/a-portrait-of-stepfamilies/>
- ^{vi} Karney, B.R., Garvan, C.W., & Thomas, M.S. (2003). Published report by the University of Florida: Family Formation in Florida: 2003 Baseline Survey of Attitudes, Beliefs, and Demographics Relating to Marriage and Family Formation. These findings were replicated in two other state representative samples.
- ^{vii} Parke, M. (2007). Are married parents really better for children? What research says about the effects of family structure on child well-being. *Couples and married research and Policy brief: Center for Law and Social Policy* (May).
- ^{viii} Hetherington, E.M. and Kelly, J. (2002). For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, p. 178. Hetherington and Kelly found that stepcouples had a divorce rate 50% higher than remarried couples without children.
- ^{ix} Simon, R. (2013). Polyparenting: the psychological impact of having multiple 'parents' in a child's life. *Family Advocate*, 36.1.
I used this article to help me sort through my own feelings of inadequacy and doubt with regard to being a parent. From the beginning of my relationships with my husband and his daughter I wondered if having a third adult in her life would help or hinder my stepdaughter's growth. This article really highlights how being a committed parent is much different than just loving a child. Through my own process of self-discovery I was able to see the differences in our parenting styles as a three-parent family and how each of us brought something valuable and unique to the table. My husband and I parented continuously and, in some ways, my stepdaughter's mother loved her without parenting. We all have different levels of attachment – to each other and to our daughter; this article helped me realize the acceptance I came to with this. When we let go of our assumptions on what a parent should be and realized that our daughter's needs varied from parent to parent we were able to discover that it wasn't a competition.
- ^x Sullivan, M. (2013). Coparenting: a lifelong partnership. *Family Advocate*, 18.

From the moment I met my husband I was forced into making a life-changing decision; to be a parent or not. Regardless of how I felt about my stepdaughter's mother, I had to accept that she and my husband were lifelong partners. They became co-parents for life as soon as our daughter was born. My personal feelings on their past, present or future relationship didn't (and really don't) matter. We established a very workable and forgiving shared-parenting model that allows us each to express our feelings without fear of repercussion. We have taught our daughter that real healthy relationships last and it's important for everyone to determine what that means for them. Because I was able to let go of any preconceived notions I may have had about my husband's "ex-girlfriend" I was able to welcome her and our daughter into my life. We all had to get used to our blended family vacations (which always include our daughter's mother and her partner and other daughter) but our situation has allowed us to avoid a lot of the negative arbitration and adverse effects on our children. We model a loving, open and welcoming family structure regardless of blood and marriage ties.

^{xi} Howell, L., Weers, R., & Kleist, D. (1998). Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families. *The Family Journal*, 6, 1, 42-45.

^{xii} Quick, D., Newman, B. & McKenry, P. (1995). Influences on the quality of the stepmother-adolescent relationship. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 24, 99-114.

^{xiii} Michaels, M.L. (2000). The Stepfamily Enrichment Program: A preliminary evaluation using focus groups. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 28, 61-73.

Many of the families that I know who are blended experience on a daily basis various problems that result from their family makeup. They often feel that they are trying to figure things out on their own or that their problems are one of a kind and that they have no one to relate to. This article spoke to me because it takes a new approach to family matters; a group approach to mitigating and navigating family issues. Blended families may be at higher risk than typical nuclear families for various problems just because of the nature of who is involved – ex-partners and spouses, children from multiple relationships and ages of children can vary greatly (take my family – our daughter was 13 when her brother was born). The potential for unique concerns by family members provided the researchers in this article the opportunity to intervene in a new way and early on. Families that have resources and who can openly express their concerns while feeling normalized may have a better chance at overcoming some of the more unique challenges that blended families face. The steps that the authors took in this article - normalizing the family experience, understanding how these families develop, strengthening the adults' relationship between each other, nurturing the parent-child relationships individually and then finally focusing on the progress of the entire family unit – really spoke to me as critical in understanding my own family. In the beginning of our relationship, my husband and I were always so focused on our daughter and her mother that we didn't take enough time to build our own relationship. This article could help serve as a resource for other families going through the joining of families. The best thing I took away from this article was the feeling of normalization. As a parent in a blended family that is not an easy thing to come by.

^{xiv} Amato, P., & Keith, B. (1991) Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110(1): 26-46.

It is often suggested that a family with two parents living in the same household fosters better socialized children with more positive development. It is also presumed that divorce and subsequent changes and variances in family structure result in a decrease in the quality of contact between children and their parents and noncustodial parents (i.e. stepparents). This article is no different. The author states that children of divorce experience a lower level of well-being than do children living in continuously intact families. The reason I used this article is because I feel our family and our daughter is a prime example of how this theory is grossly overstated and that the research up to this point does not take into consideration enough blended families who join for various reasons (like ours being one that is not the result of divorce). Articles like this reinforce the theory that divorce and nontraditional families have profound detrimental effects on children. This perception is precisely the reason I chose to write about my family – one that has produced three well adjusted, loving, kind and self-loving strong children.

^{xv} Hetherington, E. (2003) Social support and the adjustment of children in divorced and remarried

families. *Childhood*, 10(2): 217–236.

^{xvi} Amato, P. (1993). Children's adjustment to divorce. *Journal of marriage and family*, 55-1. 23.

^{xvii} Shalay, N., & Brownlee, K. (2007). Narrative family therapy with blended families. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 18(2), 17-30.

^{xviii} blended family. Merriam-Webster, Inc. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blended%20family>. (accessed: October 16, 2014).

The definition of the word “blended family” was a huge factor in my writing and use of the term. The dictionary says that my blended family came together as a result of a divorce or separation of previously married spouses; this is simply not true in our case and should not be an absolute definer of any blended family. The definition should read, “a group of people that includes children and adults biologically related or otherwise united by a series of elements, convictions or other common affiliation.” The feelings, experiences, challenges and successes our family has had as the result of our coming together does not need to be limited by how we came together.

^{xix} co-parent. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/coparent> (accessed: October 16, 2014).

This definition is also lacking and that is why I chose to include it. Yes, I am a co-parent but aren't all parents, in theory, if they share parenting responsibilities with a partner? It is once again, assumed that co-parents are parents that share responsibilities of parenting with divorced or separated adults. I would argue that ALL parents should be co-parents; divorced, separated or intact. This definition also assumes that co-parents share “equally” the custody and care of children; equal or not parenting is a joint venture. A more accurate definition, in my mind, would read “parents who share responsibility in the custody and care of a child.”

^{xx} Gonzales, J. (2009). Prefamily Counseling: Working with Blended Families. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, Vol. 50, Issue 2, pp.148-157.

^{xxi} Lamott, Anne. (1994). *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions for Writing and Life*. (1st ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

This book was a real eye-opener for me for a couple of reasons. One is that it encouraged me just to start writing. I was able to put my excuses aside and just write. It wasn't always pretty or smooth or clear but I started to write. I realized that most authors write many many drafts and they aren't award-winning or earth-shattering. I wrote some things that were amazing and I wrote some paragraphs that have since been deleted from this paper. It's all good. It's all writing and it helped to get my ideas flowing. That is instruction for writing. The other reason I liked this book and chose to include it as a resource was because it reminded me of why I wanted to write about my family in the first place. I have a story to tell and I wanted to share it. It's my own unique sense of family and self and I have been shy in the past about telling it. There is nothing wrong or weird with the fact that I like, no love, my stepdaughter's mother. She is a wonderful person and a huge part of our lives. There is nothing weird or wrong with her coming on our family vacations or staying at our house when she's in town visiting. She is as much a part of our family as our nieces, aunts, children and grandparents. I am writing to expose this oddly settling notion of family as people we care about regardless of blood relation or relationship history. That is instruction for life.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 18.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 103.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 107.

^{xxv} Wilson, E. (2014). *The meaning of human existence*. Liveright Publishing Company, New York. First ed.

^{xxvi} George Eliot wrote, “What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined – to strengthen each other – to be at one with each other in silent unspeakable memories.”

This quote is so empowering and so inspiring to me that I had to reflect on it for my writing. I wouldn't say that I'm a romantic or overly emotional person but there have been times in my life where I have experienced this feeling of true and relentless strength. Those times have come from the bond with another person or people. My own experiences as a partner, spouse, friend, and parent cause me every day to appreciate the bonds I have with the most important people in my life. The progress I've made as an individual has been heavily influenced by these people.

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- xxvii Patel, E. (2007). *Acts of Faith*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- xxviii Ibid., 179.
- xxix Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- xxx This refers to Milton R. Saperstein's quote, "Bringing up a family should be an adventure, not an anxious discipline in which everybody is constantly graded for performance."
- Such a wonderful quote! Bringing up a family is such an adventure (says the mother of a 5 year old boy and an 18 year old daughter). I do get anxious about raising my children but I also revel in the excitement of new
- xxxi National Stepfamily Resource Center. (2014). About the NSRC. Retrieved from <http://www.stepfamilies.info/about.php>, December 2014.
- xxxii Hamilton, I. & McCubbin, M. (1988). Typologies of Resilient Families: Emerging Roles of Social Class and Ethnicity. *Family Relations*, 37(3), pp. 247-254.
- xxxiii Nader, Susan. (2014). Email response to interview questions about our blended family experience.
- xxxiv Ferrucci, P. (2006). *The power of kindness*. Page 144. Penguin Group, New York.
- This book in a word: powerful. We are so often in a hurry to do something, anything, that we often put our manners and our pleasantries to the side. We are afraid of being late, of being too early, of forgetting something, of bringing too much, of over dressing or under dressing, of making a bad first impression or no impression at all that we don't always take the time to be kind – to ourselves and to others. As a parent I struggle with being kind to my children and as an individual I struggle with being kind to myself. We are so aware of what is going on around us that we often forget to pay attention to what is right in front of us and inside of us. It's hard to know how to be "kind" because that means something different to everyone. I think being kind to my children is to tell them I love them, listen to them, hug and hold them, but I also think it's letting them make their own mistakes and experience things for themselves in a way that they want to. Being kind to myself means accepting my faults and focusing on my strengths – emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and physically. Ferrucci encourages me to find opportunities to be kind every day in new ways.
- xxxv Ibid., 145.
- xxxvi Ibid., 42.
- xxxvii Ibid., 49.
- xxxviii Ibid., 183.
- xxxix education. Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. G. & C. Merriam Co., 1965. Springfield, MA.
- xl Cortazzi, M., Jin, L., Wall, D., and Cavendish, S. (2001). Sharing Learning Through Narrative Communication. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 36: 252-257.
- xli Hacking, Ian. "Actual Minds Possible Worlds." *The New Republic*. 194 (June 9, 1986).
- xlii Cook-Sather, A. (2009). I am Not Afraid to Listen: Prospective Teachers Learning from Students. *Theory Into Practice*, 48(3): 176-183.
- xliiii Bruner, E. (1986). Ethnography as narrative. In V. W. Turner & E. M. Bruner (Eds.), *The anthropology of experience* (pp. 139–155). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- xliv Maataa, K. & Uusiautti, S. (2012). Changing Identities: Finnish Divorcees' Perceptions of a New Marriage. *Journal of Divorce and Marriage*, 53(7): 515-532.
- xlv Finley, G.E. & Schwartz, S.J. (2010). The divided world of the child: Divorce and long-term psychosocial adjustment. *Family Court Review*, 48: 516-527.
- xlvi Lenski, G. (2005). Determinants of the Characteristics of Individual Societies: The Independent Variables. In "Ecological-Evolutionary Theory: Principles and Applications." Chapter 4, 53-80. Paradigm Publishers. Boulder, London.
- xlvii Ham, B. (2004). The Effects of Divorce and Remarriage on the Academic Achievement of High School Seniors. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 42(1-2): 159-178.
- xlviii Shaw, P. (2004). Death and Divorce: Teaching Dilemmas or Teachable Moments? *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 40:4, 165-169.

^{xlix} Braithwaite, D., Olson, L., Golish, T., Soukup, C. & Turman, P. (2001). Becoming a family: developmental processes represented in blended family discourse. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 29:3, 221-247.

¹ The Step Family Foundation. (2014). Available at <http://www.stepfamily.org/stepfamily-statistics.html>. Retrieved November 2014.

I referenced this site for no other reason that I found it fascinating that there is an entire foundation dedicated to step families! Even though I disagree with some of the research they are highlighting (for example, that children of blended families are torn between households as a rule) I just think it's interesting that someone at some point thought, hey, we should raise money and make a foundation to study this. I do like how they incorporate the terms "blended family" and "co-parenting" so that makes me think they are honoring the differences in types of families. I also found out that there are specific certifications and licenses for people who specifically want to work with stepfamilies. This is good to know in case my family or other families I know what to seek advice. Generally just an interesting resource. The president of the foundation is a stepmother and it's interesting to hear how her initial experiences encouraged her to help others.