

## Performing Fatherhood: A Graduate Student Odyssey

Matt Fotis

(The lights rise to reveal six easels with the titles of the stories written on one side, and a family photo – unseen – on the other. The performer crosses center stage, and kneels in prayer facing upstage. Angelic music sounds. A picture of Don Draper appears. He is stern, sitting cross-legged in an office chair, a cigarette in one hand, a glass of whiskey in the other. He couldn't be more masculine.)

*What makes a good father? What makes a good son? How did I end up in bed with my wife and father-in-law? I guess the question that I'm really asking is – what is it that makes someone a man?*

(The performer addresses the audience.)

*And I don't know. I don't think any of us know. We idolize the idea of Don Draper despite the fact he's pretty much the worst husband and father on the face of the earth and of course despite the fact that he's not even real. But fuck me if he isn't masculine. We're caught in a strange moment in time – in many ways still clinging to the traditional role of the father as breadwinner and decision maker, the parent you fear, home for twenty minutes a day and emotionally distant. Yet that great American fallacy of masculinity that has haunted generations of men is starting to become a dinosaur...yet we still cling to those values because however flawed, at least the Draper model gave us something to go on. So I guess the question I'm asking you is, what does it mean to be a man in the post-feminism-but-we're-really-still-in-that-movement-so-don't-get-all-up-in-arms-because-that's-not-what-this-show-is-about generation?*

*I am for all intents and purposes a stay-at-home dad, who just so happens to be getting his PhD in-between play dates and diaper changes. This was not the life I expected. I thought I'd be a successful something by now and that my wife would be at home with the kids. Instead, she's out working and I'm at home...reading about feminism. I have no problem with the fact that she makes more money than me, I just wish I made more money than her because she doesn't make that much money. I have no problem that when I go to the park the other mom's assume its "divorced daddy's turn to play with the kids" and keep their children away from me. On the flip side, since the bar for fathers is set so unbelievably low most moms praise me for essentially keeping my children alive. I'm not sure what moms have to do to receive the "you're such a good mom" comment, but I get the "you're such a good dad" comment even while my children are eating rocks and playing with knives. Jeanette does everything mothers have done for centuries, she is by any account a much better parent*

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*than I am, but nobody stops her at the supermarket and tells her “you’re such a good mom” because she’s buying baby food. And that’s not fair. There is an obvious and giant double standard. But I don’t want to be “such a good dad” because I take my kids to the park, I want to be a good dad in the way that a woman is a good mom, not in the way that I’m not Don Draper ...*

(The performer sits in an armchair and mimics the Don Draper photo).

*... even though I want to be Don Draper – god those are nice suits! You know what, I’m not sure if I’m man enough to be a woman. I do have a problem being labeled less of a man because I take care of my kids, less of a parent because I have a penis, but I’m not sure that it makes me more of a man or more of a parent. I’m Mr. Mom thirty years later, but I can’t really tell you how I got here or what I’m doing.*

*Well, that’s not totally true. Nearly four years ago my father got cancer and that set off a chain reaction of events that took me from a temporary accountant in Chicago to a stay at home dad working on his PhD in the middle of Missouri. I had only just realized what it meant to be a son when I became a father. And just as I assumed the role of primary breadwinner I became the primary care giver. I went from Don to Betty Draper, well more like whoever their black nanny is. And I have no idea what I’m doing. So we had two more kids. So I’ve put together this series of stories about fathers and sons to try and figure out what it means to be a father, what it means to be a son, and how to mix the two.*



I just received my PhD. I know, I’m as shocked as you are. I even landed a tenure-track job. Believe me, I’m even more shocked than you are. I have three kids. Seriously, how did that happen? And as I stand at the beginning of my professional career and look back on my graduate career, I channel my inner David Byrne and can only say, “How did I get here?” The long and the short answer, I think, is kids.

It was never my plan to write my dissertation with toys, diapers and other paraphernalia from three kids stacked on my desk. But here I am, writing this sentence with a three-month old strapped to my chest, a twenty-month-old running around with a pair of toy golf clubs on the verge of breaking nearly everything in our apartment, and a three-and-a-half year old judging my sentence structure. Four years ago I was working for an international public relations firm in Chicago. My wife was pregnant. I was a certified red-blooded American male. Sure, I wasn’t comfortable using power tools, but at least I was providing for my family. For some reason I got the crazy notion that instead of staying in a job I hated, I would follow my dream and apply to a PhD program. In Theatre. With a new baby. A quick glance at any “Guide to Graduate School” handbook pretty clearly states that having a baby in graduate school is akin to taking a cyanide capsule. Gregory Colón Semenza sums it up best when he says, “in an ideal world, you’d wait until your dissertation had been revised

for publication...before starting a family.”<sup>1</sup> The general consensus is that if you want to be ABD forever, have a baby in graduate school. If you want to finish, put it off (and if you want tenure put it off again). The choice is pretty clear: you can have a career *or* a family. Ignorant of the fact that I shouldn’t have a baby in graduate school I put my application in the mail.

And I got in. I know, I was as surprised as you. I mean, really, why does the Quantitative section of the GRE have to exist? And why do theatre departments care if I know how to figure the volume of an isosceles triangle inside of a parallelogram? And once you get in, you have to spread the news. Telling friends, family and colleagues that you are going to graduate school is tricky business. Some assume that you are afraid to grow up, some think you are a failure, some think you are abandoning them and giving up, and yes, some think that it’s great. Doing so when your wife is pregnant, however, adds another layer. The societal view of the father “as the breadwinner...still captures men’s requirements for masculinity and fatherhood.”<sup>2</sup> Forgoing a good paying job, even if it is one that you hate and aren’t very good at – I mean how the hell did I get into finance anyway with a MA in theatre? – to go back to school is something that many see as self indulgent and foolish. In other words, it’s not something a father should do. Even though, as Mark Morman and Kory Floyd argue “fatherhood is currently in the midst of such a shift away from the authoritarian, emotionally detached father and toward the involved, nurturant father,”<sup>3</sup> contemporary fathers still face stereotypical expectations that society puts on us, and even those we put on ourselves. Nancy Dowd argues in *Redefining Fatherhood*, that though “fathers are more engaged in the care of children than ever before...father care remains rooted in the assumption that the mother will be the primary caregiver.”<sup>4</sup> This cultural assumption not only positions women as less valuable in the workplace, but also marks the father as provider rather than caregiver. Instead of watching the kids, a father is “expected to be the unquestioned ruler of his household and responsible for managing his family’s provisioning efforts.”<sup>5</sup> Wait, my graduate stipend won’t do that?

Was I letting down my family and shirking my fatherly duties? So what if I hate my job, lots of people hate their jobs but they press on because that’s what a man does. A father foregoes his dreams to provide for his family. Isn’t that what makes a good father? Putting food on the table, clothes on the back and a roof over the head?

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Colón Semenza, *Graduate Study for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, 63.

<sup>2</sup> John Duckworth and Patrice Buzzanell, “Performing Fatherhood: Masculine and Caregiving Identity(ies) in Work-Family Contexts,” *International Communication Association*, 2007 Annual Meeting, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Morman and Kory Floyd, “A ‘Changing Culture of Fatherhood:’ Effects of Affectionate Communication, Closeness, and Satisfaction in Men’s Relationships with their Fathers and their Sons,” *Western Journal of Communication* (Fall 2002, Vol. 66, Issue 4), 395.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy E. Dowd, *Redefining Fatherhood*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Duckworth and Buzzanell, 5.

I then tried to step back from the money aspect, and thought about what kind of father I wanted my son to have. Did I want him to see me as a man who sacrificed his dreams to provide for his family? Or do I want him to see a man that chased his dreams, and still managed to provide for his family? Do I want him to think that he prevented me from chasing my dream? How could I tell him that he could do or be anything he wanted when I hadn't done the same? Suddenly it was a pretty easy decision.

Wait, my grad stipend is how much?

My entry into graduate school was coupled with my wife's re-entry into the working world. Our traditional gender roles were reversed, leading a few warm-hearted relatives to let me know that I was further shirking my responsibilities as a man. But what are relatives for if not to blindly judge you? <sup>6</sup> With my new more "flexible" academic schedule, I was also going to become my son's primary care giver. If the males in my life had been puzzled and disappointed in my performance of masculinity, then the females in my life were tickled that I was going to try and play house. It was generally understood that I would fail, and that Jeanette would somehow have to balance a work life and raising our son. While some people celebrated (and mocked) my Mr. Mom lifestyle, nobody celebrated Jeanette's working life. While Jeanette's department has been about as supportive of a work environment as we could have possibly asked for, many people are amazed that she leaves our kids home with me, assuming that even if I'm home the kids are in daycare. They're equally astonished if I bring her a sandwich for lunch, or to hear that I did the laundry, or basically if I exert any effort doing "womanly" things. They treat her as though she's going it on her own, as though having a husband is akin to having a fish tank at home. It's nice to look at and requires regular feedings and cleaning, but isn't very helpful.

Yet how do I tell my story? How do I tell the story of a young man entering the world of academia with a wife, newborn son, and graduate stipend? How do I tell the story of a man who was once told as an undergraduate that if I planned on going into academia, which at the time I didn't, that the worst thing I could do was get married (oops). And if I wanted a zero percent chance of finishing a PhD I could compound that mistake and have kids (double oops...I mean triple oops). Thanks to one of the seemingly thousands of books I've encountered in graduate school I've discovered the world of personal narrative autobiographical performance. "You mean I can just tell my story? Why didn't I think of that?" I decided to initially frame my story around the birth of my son in the autobiographical performance piece *Baby Fotis*, which grew into the longer full-length solo piece exploring fatherhood and masculinity *My Fragile Family Tree: Stories about Fathers and Sons*.

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<sup>6</sup> Let me just briefly clarify that my parents and in-laws were completely supportive of my decision. They simply attempted to guilt me at every opportunity for taking their grandson away.

As Kristin Langellier notes in “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know,” “The *personal* in personal narrative implies a performative struggle for agency rather than the expressive act of a pre-existing, autonomous, fixed, unified, or stable self which serves as the origin or accomplishment of experience.”<sup>7</sup> This struggle exists in our daily battle with defining the self, and manifests itself through performance. How do I convey (and discover) the multiple layers of my identity? I don’t know what it means to be a man anymore; what it means to be a father. As Langellier asserts, *My Fragile Family Tree* is not a story told from a fixed viewpoint, rather it is my struggle to define exactly who is the person writing this essay with one hand, feeding a baby in the other, and who’s completely covered in “urp”? The act of performing autobiography, as Heather Carver argues, “thus becomes an interpretation of one’s own life story, with the author functioning in multiple roles of writing, interpreting, and performing the self.”<sup>8</sup> Through performing *My Fragile Family Tree*, I’m hoping to discover more about my self and my role as a father/son/man/student/teacher/husband. The performance helps define how I view the world, and how that worldview changed during the past four years of my graduate student/parenthood odyssey.

The experience of giving birth and juggling an academic life with parenthood has been mostly limited in autobiographical performance and academic writing to the female perspective.<sup>9</sup> There are obvious reasons for this, namely the fact that the woman is the one that has a human being come out of them. There are so many physical, emotional and mental challenges for women that I cannot even begin to imagine and am thankful that I do not have to face. Likewise, while the tenure system is generally unfair to parents, it is punishing for mothers who often have to put off their families indefinitely to meet the demands of the academy or face unfair choices should they decide to have a baby. As Joan Williams notes, “academe is still based on a model in which men worked and their wives stayed at home with the children. “This is a job structure that systematically excludes mothers.”<sup>10</sup> But where does that leave non-Don Draper fathers? Fathers in the actual world, who have spouses that work, or no spouse at all? Fathers who due to their “flexible” academic schedule are the primary care givers? Fathers on a graduate stipend? Who are trying to juggle teaching two classes, taking three more, attending conferences, maintaining some semblance of their creative professional life, sitting on committees, running an improv program, trying to negotiate the various personalities of their committee members while at the same time seeing their wife more than once a week, while balancing the needs of three small children who don’t care about any of that stuff but only want their dad to “stay

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<sup>7</sup> Kristin Langellier, “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* (April 1999, Vol. 19, Issue 2), 129.

<sup>8</sup> M. Heather Carver, “Risky Business,” *Voices Made Flesh* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* had an entire issue dedicated to “Mothering in the Academy,” Vol 5, No 2 (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Qtd. in Deanna Shoemaker, “Mamafest!”, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 31:2, 191.

here Daddy. I need you. Please don't go to wehearsal." What if I'm the one staying home?

Much like Joanne Detore-Nakamura frets in "Dissertation Distress: A Room of One's Own With a Crib and Computer," I live in constant flux between academic and parent. This sentence took me forty five minutes to write because Nils wants to play "Hi-Ho Cheerio," and I've already stalled him with "just let Daddy finish this thought" five times. I try to work during nap times, living in constant fear of my children waking up before I'm finished reading four articles on gendered performance, a book on auto-ethnography, lesson planning for two classes, grading seventeen screenplays about a "screenwriter who can't think of an idea to write about," and trying to teach myself simultaneously how to fold a fitted sheet and how to cook asiago stuffed chicken breasts (only one of the last two pursuits was successful). It's impossible sometimes to simply check email, or go to a production meeting because "I can't get a babysitter." I had to choose between attending auditions for my play *Nights on the Couch* and staying home with my oldest son who had just finished his first week of preschool. My son, much like his father, is terrified of social interaction and needed some one-on-one time to decompress. And I wanted to spend the time with him. So I did. This time. Other times I've picked school. I didn't realize how hard it would be. There are some things that sort of make you feel guilty even though you aren't really doing anything wrong. It's like drinking bottled water...on top of a landfill...and then shoving the empty bottle down a sweaty polar bear's throat. I thought fathers got to go to work guilt free so long as they bring home a pay check (or grad stipend)?

The day after I moved to Columbia to start school I had a meeting for my upcoming TA position with a professor. I asked if I could bring Nils with me. "He's five months old and will sleep the whole time." "I'd rather not," she replied, "just get a babysitter." I wasn't exactly sure how to respond seeing as how I had been in Columbia for all of fourteen hours – our stuff wasn't even there yet – and couldn't possibly find a babysitter, let alone a babysitter that I trusted. There was one other option that really shouldn't have been an option. I asked Jeanette to take Nils with her to work for a few hours, because as a woman it would be okay for her to have a kid at work. I was embarrassed that my wife had to work, that I wasn't providing like a real man. I was embarrassed to bring my kid with me to work because somehow the world would see me as a failure – Don Draper never brings his kids to work. I caved. There is a full on crisis of masculinity going on and we're all caught in the middle. Just look at what's on television. As more and more men become stay at home dads or their child's primary care giver, we are being bombarded with shows featuring "real men" catching fish with their bare hands, surviving in the wilderness for weeks on end with only a candy bar and their rugged masculinity, bearded burly men manning deadly fishing expeditions, or driving trucks across ice.

*What I've Learned from TV & Movies about Being a Man*

- 1) *Being a detached and overall terrible dad actually is the cleverest way to be a good dad, because then when you exert any effort you get rewarded for it.*
- 2) *Raising a teenage daughter that falls in love with and travels the world with a vampire – and you don't notice any of it – doesn't automatically earn you the worst father of the year award.*
- 3) *Being clueless and overweight is my God earned right, as is a disproportionately attractive and sympathetic wife.*
- 4) *It's never a bad idea to have a failed stand-up comic and a failed musician move in to help me raise my children. Cut – it – out.*
- 5) *Misogyny set to rap music entitles me to a cadre of disproportionately attractive and sympathetic bitches.*
- 6) *All I need to do to be a good husband is to remember that “every kiss begins with Kay.”*
- 7) *A real man can blow up anything using anything, defeat any number of highly trained ninjas in any number of back alleys or abandoned warehouses, and win back any number of his ex-wives' and/or estranged daughters' love simply by thwarting a terrorist attack.*
- 8) *I need to drink light beer and be a giant douche-bag while doing it, and this behavior entitles me to a disproportionately attractive and sympathetic girlfriend. Man Up!*
- 9) *I can be a dad whenever it is convenient for me or the writers of my show, like when they need to replace the weird monkey that I always had with me for some reason. Don't pretend like you didn't watch Friends!*
- 10) *Accidentally killing another man, stealing his identity, cheating on your wife and being an absent dad is fine so long as you look good doing it, drink lots of whiskey and can make a Kodak picture carousel sound cool...and then when she leaves you everyone feels bad for you.*

Four years later I've brought my children to classes and meetings when I've had to, although I do my absolute best not to do this and “take advantage.” Of course this is a risky proposition. Look, babysitters decide not to show up sometimes, even if you have a class that you're supposed to teach or a presentation to give that's worth 50% of your grade. Sometimes you tell babysitters not to come because you're dead broke and can't pay them. So sometimes you pack up the car, stuff some diapers and toys in-between theory books and bring the kids to campus. Does class go smoothly when neither I nor my kids can distinguish between Daddy and Teacher? Do I clearly articulate the political theatre of the nineteenth century when I'm holding a kid in each arm? But that's what I have to do sometimes. And that's what mothers have to do sometimes, and while it's not a great tenure move for either mothers or fathers, and no study has shown that I'll complete my dissertation faster the more my kids are on campus, a father is looked at in less than favorable light if he brings his kids to work (that is if it is out of necessity rather than daddy takes Julie to work day at school). I have not only the juggling act of having my kids in class, I also wear the burden of “FAILED MAN COMING THROUGH. UNABLE TO PROPERLY PROVIDE FOR HIS FAMILY. PENIS SMALLER THAN REAL MAN'S PENIS.” And of course my kids love coming to school with me, which makes not bringing them with me both heartbreaking and confusing for them and me. Better add “CONSISTENTLY DISAPPOINTING CHILDREN” to the sign.

At that moment, my first actual act of graduate school, I didn't know what to do and caved. Despite improvements in academe, being a stay-at-home dad/PhD student/academic still isn't looked on favorably. While being a father means that statistically I actually have a better chance of achieving tenure—fingers crossed—as Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden demonstrate in “Do Babies Matter? The Effect of Family Formation on the Lifelong Careers of Academic Men and Women,” I'm just trying to survive graduate school. I don't have the resources available to hire a nanny, and my kids are too little to be in school. They're with me. I don't see how being unable to touch a computer all day because I'm playing Candy Land, changing diapers and praying for five minutes alone to take a shower is helping me get tenure, let alone finish my dissertation.

While having a baby many times forces a woman to take time off, as a man I don't physically have to take time off, but I might want to take time off to be with my new baby. Is that not allowed? Actually, it sort of isn't. As Robin Wilson argues, many professors “hide or minimize family commitments in order to show their dedication to career.”<sup>11</sup> While there have been incremental improvements in the system such as (unpaid) year-long leaves during the probationary tenure period for new parents, as Semenza notes “new dads who take off time or stop the tenure clock are often ridiculed in various indirect ways by administrators and colleagues alike (as well as family members, in some cases), just as in corporate America.”<sup>12</sup> Changing policies is a start, like offering paid paternal leave, but changing the cultural stigma of a stay-at-home dad or working father is something that runs much deeper. Mary Ann Mason agrees, saying that even fathers who are involved parents or primary care givers “don't often use parental accommodations, because, like many mothers, they fear they will be considered less committed by their institutions.”<sup>13</sup> I guess one pro of graduate school is that I don't have any benefits to not take advantage of. Juggling parenting, school and masculinity was going to be harder than I thought.

*We aren't pregnant, Jeanette is; I guess I just want to be included. What can I say? I'm perpetually twelve years old with giant buck teeth praying someone will sit next to me on the bus.*

Let me put out a fire and say that I am not challenging the centrality of the female childbirth experience or diminish the daunting task of motherhood in the academy. I know my path is easier. Rather it is an attempt to give voice to *my* childbirth experience and role as a father in the academy. I want to be included in the birth story. I might not be the one doing the heavy lifting, but that doesn't mean it isn't the definitive moment of my life. Why isn't my story just as valid as Jeanette's? Why isn't my parental juggling act worth watching? Why is it if I say “I can't go to the meeting because I have to pick up Nils from preschool” it isn't as culturally accepted as a

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<sup>11</sup> Robin Wilson, “This Academic Life,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50.3, 2004, A11.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Colón Semenza, *Graduate Study for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Ann Mason, “Men and Mothering,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2009.

woman picking up her child from school? As a man it's socially acceptable for me to have a family, so long as they are seen as the beneficiaries of my hard work, and not a distraction or competing interest. It is assumed that a family is a distraction for a woman (which is wildly unfair), but if it is a distraction for a man it's assumed he must have some sort of testosterone deficiency. For a man success at work is culturally more important than success at home, but what if circumstances dictate that I must be successful at home because that is my work?

Yet my story isn't groundbreaking or particularly unique. It's hard to believe, but lots of men are fathers that have gone through the childbirth experience, several of whom were in the very same hospital as me on the very same night. There are scores of male graduate students and young professors with children, many acting as the primary caregiver. Yet all we hear about this group is that "surprisingly, having early babies seems to help men; men who have early babies achieve tenure at slightly higher rates than people who do not have early babies."<sup>14</sup> Boy, I sure hope that's true. Did having "early babies" help me get a job? Maybe. Although I thought my teaching demonstration was pretty awesome too. But I also think it totally diminishes my role as a father. As Deanna Shoemaker notes in *Mamafesto!*, "mothers seeking tenure are often competing with men who have a spouse who primarily takes care of work in the home, while 91% of working women professors have spouses who also work full-time."<sup>15</sup> Again, I'm not denying the harsh reality that academic life often makes a woman chose between career and family, I'm arguing that it isn't exclusive to women. I do the laundry. I do the cooking. My wife does clean the bathrooms because I just can't do it. We both get up with the kids in the middle of the night. I sleep occasionally at best. So am I still 20% more likely to get tenure because I'm a man with a child? Forget about tenure, what about my dissertation? Maybe I should have just assigned a dissertation chapter for each of my kids to complete and I'd have been done in no time!

I don't mean to imply that I'm going it alone. My wife is phenomenal. My parents and in-laws have been incredibly supportive and helpful. Throughout my graduate career my colleagues and professors have been nothing short of astonishingly supportive. Even that professor who told me not to bring Nils eventually acquiesced after I just started bringing him because I couldn't afford a babysitter every time I needed to go to a meeting. Jeanette's department has pseudo adopted our children. When we switched apartments after our daughter was born (number three if you are counting) they essentially came over and moved us. I can't imagine having picked a better place to attempt to raise a child and go to school. Professors have told me, and in one instance begged me to bring my children to class. They've gone out of their way to accommodate me. Yet at the same time I don't want to be accommodated. I don't want to be treated as if I need special circumstances that differ from my

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden, "Do Babies Matter? The Effect of Family Formation on the Lifelong Careers of Academic Men and Women." *Academe*, 88.6, 2002, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Shoemaker, 200

colleagues. Of course having three young kids at home is trying, and of course I want that trial to be acknowledged. But I'm stubborn. I come from a long line of Germans, Swedes and Greeks that only know sausage, depression and how to be stubborn. It's frustrating when a single childless colleague quips, "whenever I feel overwhelmed I just think of you and it calms me down a little...don't be offended by that. It's a compliment. I don't know how you manage." Here is the secret: I don't. That's how. Sometimes I have to be a crappy father. Sometimes I have to be a crappy student. Sometimes I have to be a crappy teacher, a crappy husband, a crappy person. Sometimes I have to have my own meltdown.

### *Cookies*

*"Cookie? Cookie? I wanna cookie."*

*I don't remember what I was doing, but whatever it was it was very important to me in that moment because it was keeping me from writing my performance ethnography paper. "It's lunch time in twenty minutes Nils. You can have a cookie after lunch."*

*"Cookie. Please."*

*"Nils, what did I just say?" Sometimes I forget that he's two. He does not care about logic or reason. He cares about cookies.*

*"Cookie. I wanna cookie."*

*"Nils."*

*"Cookie. Cookie. Cookie. Cookie. Cookie."*

*"Stop whining." I just want to get back to putting off my responsibilities. "You want a cookie, here's your fucking cookie!"*

*Nils eats his cookie. I go back to playing FreeCell or whatever it was I had to get back to. A minute passes and then there is a tug on my shirt.*

*"More fucking cookies please."*

Sometimes the balance gets out of whack and my children learn new vocab words for the GRE. But I don't want to feel like I need to be accommodated because I have a family. I don't want to be less than my colleagues who can focus their full attention on school. Or get a free pass because "Matt has kids." I want to feel like having a family and being a graduate student is okay. I want to tell people that having three kids has made my graduate life fulfilling and helped keep me balanced and sane. I want to say that having a reason bigger than school to finish school has helped me immeasurably. Having three kids depend on me helps focus me. Nap time became sacred to all of us, they sleep and I tirelessly work (wishing I was asleep). Having three kids helped put everything in perspective. Yes, I *want* to finish my PhD and be successful in academia, but my kids *need* me to be their father.

I did finish. Mainly because I had a reason bigger than myself driving me to finish. And as I stand on the precipice of academe I still don't really know what it means to be a father, or a teacher, or a husband, or a son...I do unfortunately know what it means to be a Cubs fan. As Ron Pelias says "You want, as a father, to be the father that your father was. You want to be present. You want to say what is possible

and pertinent. You want to show what can be.”<sup>16</sup> I want to be everything for my children that my father was for me. Yet how do I do that? I want to be the best student and scholar that I can be. Yet how do I do that? I want and need to be the best husband that I can be. Yet how do I do that? I want to be an engaging, dynamic, fair and productive teacher. Yet how do I do that? And how do I do all of that at the same time? I suppose the paths will be intertwined, and maybe I’ll be able to work them out on-stage ... and do it all on a graduate stipend.



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<sup>16</sup> Pelias, 62.