

Vince Speaks on Home and Family

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Which experiences should I share? Do I share what it's like to raise an African American child - an adopted child? Do I focus on being a parent in a mixed race family, an older parent - an out activist gay parent - my partner Jack and I raising a daughter? Do I present these issues as obstacles or as challenges that, when confronted, help Mona, Jack and I become stronger as individuals and as a family? I am reminded of the many times I've told Mona simpler does not mean better. Should I ignore all I've just mentioned and share cute little anecdotes - like the time Mona, as a proud toddler, learned the song *You're a Grand Old Flag* at her day care and insisted that Jack and I stop everything to listen? She proceeded to belt out: "You're a grand old fag." Another time, on the drive back from Family Week in P'Town, Mona, about two at the time, asked if she was African American. She had just spent a week absorbing the life stories of hundreds of GLBT families. I responded, "yes." Then she asked, "Are you African American." I answered, "no." "What are you?" she persisted. "I guess we could say I'm European American." Mona thought for a moment then gave levity to these sometimes-cumbersome identities: "We'll Poppy if you're European American then I'm Europoopen American."

I questioned dominant stories early in life. In third grade, one in a large extended Italian family where blood is thicker than water -la famiglia, I was told that I was adopted, but it wasn't something to discuss - once said, put this information away. Soon after, another unmentionable emerged: my fickle crushes on girls turned to deeper more complex feelings toward boys. I mention this, not to recall the burgeoning feelings of a young gay adoptee, but to point out that to some degree the parent I eventually became had much to do with what I questioned as a child - even something as supposedly irreplaceable and sacrosanct as a mother's love.

A dear friend, Arlene Istar Lev, recently had a book published on GLBT parenting. She boldly writes that queer parents and families are not like straight families, and that we should bring our most marginalized families to the center. Being a rather arrogant queer myself, I celebrate her words. I was thinking of Ari's words the other night while Jack, Mona and I curled up on the couch and watched Barbara Strisand in *Funny Girl*. I mean how many 8 year olds in straight families know that Fanny Brice was once a Ziegfeld star? For us it's a cultural literacy issue. Another somewhat uniquely queer incident occurred about two years ago, in school. Mona's music teacher separated the boys from the girls for chorus. Mona explained to me that he thought the girls should sing high and the boys should sing low. She smirked and said, "I guess he's never heard the Flirtations sing."

One argument used to discourage GLBT parenting is that our kids are more likely to turn out to be gay. Popular, gay friendly rebuttals attempt to refute this argument, but my response is, "So what?" I don't know if queer parents will tilt the Kinsey scales, and I don't care. But I love that our families are rupturing some long held and oppressive lies. A few weeks ago Mona asked why we had moved back into Syracuse, from our home in Spafford. I told her that Daddy and I felt it would be better for our family - there are more African Americans, more out gay people in the city. She asked, "Aren't there gay people where we used to live?" "Of course there are," I responded, and as I attempted to elaborate she interrupted - a common practice, "Oh I know what you mean," she said, "it's like if two men live together they pretend that one is the butler, and, when one man goes out, the butler has to go with him, so if he falls down or something the butler can pick him up."

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Now I don't think this is an accurate portrayal of gay life in Spafford or Marcellus or Skaneateles, but it shows what queer families bring to the table. If we are honest and true to our experiences, our children develop a healthy mistrust for the way things are "supposed to be" — they know that gender, race, birth circumstance, sexual preference define us only because these qualities are defined by a dominant structure. There is no *real* parent, *real* way to love, or *real* way to live.

As an infant, Mona had reflux: she choked and, for what seemed like hours, stopped breathing. For three months, Jack and I took turns holding her through the night, so she wouldn't have to lay down flat in a bassinet. I took the first shift holding her against my chest while I attempted to sleep upright in a big easy chair. At about 3:00 a.m., Jack took the second shift. Our bonding with Mona was not defined by our biological connection or by our gender; it went far beyond both.

A few weeks ago, Mona was upset about something. She was overtired and she was crying. She told Jack that she wanted to go home. Jack answered, "We are home." Mona responded, "No, I mean P'town." Since Mona was 10 months old, our family has attended Family Week in Provincetown. It is a wonderful event where families are defined by love and commitment, not by fears and rules. Last summer, in P'town, while having dinner with several friends - at this particular dinner all the adults were men and had become parents through adoption - I walked into the kitchen where the kids were eating (parents were eating outside on the deck). The kids barely noticed my intrusion; they were preoccupied with conversations around adoption, race, having two dads. They were connecting, learning, identifying with each other. They were not objects of curiosity or ridicule. Their lives, if only for a moment, were at the center — not the margins.

There is bumper sticker that reads *P'town is a State of Mind*. I take it to mean a way of thinking. I know a man who donated sperm and did not give it a second thought — some men would be haunted by what ifs. I know a woman who had an abortion and remembers it as a medical procedure — some women are traumatized by the experience. I know a couple who was waiting to adopt a child from another country — all they had was a picture and some statistics. When the adoption fell through, they grieved the loss. In my own search for my birth family, I met many people, birth parents and adoptees, who were searching. Some found and responses varied: joy, rejection, polite indifference. All these responses are valid and match a way of thinking. Twenty-five years ago, I found my birth family. At first, I was swept up in the romance of the reunion, but, as time passed, even this story was to be revised. Blood is thicker than water proved to be yet another faulty metaphor, begging answers to questions: Whose blood? Whose water? And under what circumstances? There is no real way to create a family, followed by less worthy imitations. If I had the power to change my family: to be straight, married and to have children carrying my wife's and my DNA, I would relinquish the power in a heartbeat, because for me - in my state of mind — in my way of thinking — anything different than what I now have would be the less worthy imitation of family.

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Families like ours are under attack by those who claim to know the *rea*/way to parent, to love, to live. They cloak their bigotry in righteousness. More lies. History teaches us the dangers of self-righteous bigotry: unjust laws, slavery, encampment, torture and genocide. We are not beyond such atrocities. Consider the fear tactics that were used in our last presidential election. They worked.

P'town, like home and family, is a state of mind. When Mona says, "I want to go home," Jack and I wrap our arms around her and answer, "We're there baby, we're already there."

-Vince

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