The Choices We Make, the Fears We Have

We all have choices in life. To be sure, some of us have more choices than others. Some choices are easier for certain people than they are for others. And some people refuse to see, or are unable to see, their lives as ones of choice. But the choices are there nonetheless. Every choice we make sets us down a pathway, and very few pathways are either straight or quick. It is sometimes hard to see far enough down each path to make a perfect decision. And we inherently know that there are few paths without at least some semblance of risk, and few journeys that do not, at least at the outset, involve some degree of fear.

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I think we see far more fear around us each day than we realize. Fear comes in many forms: a fear of being physically injured may guide us toward lives of little risk; fear of being poor may lead us to accept or keep jobs that we don’t really want; fear of inadequacy can lead us to avoid celebrating ourselves and our dreams; fear of being made fun of or of not being accepted may lead us to avoid deviating from the norm or what we believe is expected of us. For fathers, fears and uncertainties are varied and acute, and sometimes paralyzing. The roots of some of our concerns run very deep into our childhoods. They affect our ability to partner, and to parent, wholly and enthusiastically. And if we have made the amazing choice to unschool, or parent authentically, these uncertainties can stop us in our tracks—and stop our relationships with those we love, as well.

Many future fathers enter adulthood feeling fairly content and happy, but with some uncertainties and fears. These concerns, I think, are fairly common for both men and women, in a variety of situations and cultures:

What do I really want to do with my life?

Am I worthy of being loved for all of my amazing qualities as well as all of my terrible ones?

Is it safe to express my emotions?

Will my deepest inner secrets be exposed if I allow myself to get too intimate?

Am I good enough, at anything, to be attractive as a person, a partner, a friend, a lover, a child, or a worker?

I had most of these fears when Ginger and I met, but soon they began to melt away. We developed a deep honesty beyond anything I felt possible, based on a trust that could only be reserved for the special place where true soulmates live. We never put on airs, or felt we had to, and quickly came to love each other for all of our warts and wonders. And this small melting
helped me to believe that it was safe to question and confront my fears, to see if they were based on fact—and if so, if they could be altered or changed. I knew that I could master my uncertainties and prove to myself that I was worthy of all I wanted in the world.

But many men struggle to shed those feelings of uncertainty and fear. They get through it—sometimes alone, and sometimes with help. Sometimes all of the fears seem to go away, and sometimes they come back. Some men are controlled by the fears, others adjust and get to a level of comfort and balance with themselves and their partners.

And then, if they are lucky, they find out that they are going to be a father.

The Fears of Fatherhood

Finding out that you’re going to be a father is a very crystallizing and defining moment in a man’s life. Some men run from it, others embrace it, and still more are frankly puzzled by it—so the fears and uncertainties, once believed to have been overcome, can come flooding out again:

Will I be a good father?

Will my children love me?

Can I escape my own upbringing, and do better?

Can I parent with my heart, more than with my head?

Will my partner still love me if I am not a good father?
Will she even tell me if I’m doing poorly?

Will I ever learn enough, know enough, and contribute enough to our parenting relationship?

How will I respond if the kids get sick? How will I respond if one of them dies?

How can I keep them safe, provide for them, provide for my partner, and stay happy at the same time?

It can be completely overwhelming under the best of circumstances. There is a sudden sense of being responsible for someone else, of having to provide for them with our partner. And we may still be grappling with the other uncertainties and inadequacies that we have carried around with us for years.

There is an immediacy to being a new parent which requires us to handle stressful situations in a calm, thoughtful manner. But if we have not been willing or able to reconcile our fears and uncertainties, “calm” and “thoughtfulness” are states of being that are difficult to attain, and even more difficult to maintain. I think that, under stress, we are prone to default to our most basic personalities, to use whatever familiar coping mechanisms we happen to have used in the past. Sometimes, the only way to really work through this effectively is to latch on to something familiar that helps ground us a bit so we can deal effectively with the swirling emotions and seismic shifts in…well, just about everything that comes with being a new parent.

For me, in order to grasp my new life I had to rely on my old paradigms of what a parent “should” be for guidance. In my head, I had mapped out exactly what it takes to raise a child, be a husband, have a productive household, and be an accepted member of society. For me, it was pretty simple, really. Dad works, Mom works; breakfast as a family with a healthy meal; lunches and book bags all packed the night before; kids on the bus and doing well at school; work being hard but rewarding; home by 6 p.m., kids all there, dinner together, then chores; some time to play, then homework; then time to brush your teeth and put on your PJs, and off to bed by 9:30 or so. Of course, the kids would play sports, and I’d be a member of the Jaycees, Mom would be on the Chamber of Commerce, etc., etc., etc. We might even go to church on Sundays and sing in the choir. It’s important to note that these “expectations” of what my life would be like were not some mere abstract, or some societal norm that I simply bought into.
These were things I wanted; they were what mattered; they were the way it was done. If we did it this way, everyone would be happy, no one would get hurt, and we would raise our kids to be responsible members of society. And as a dad, my role was critical. I had to be the driver to ensure all of this happened on schedule.

In other words, these thoughts were safe for me; they were what I knew, and how I could get through the initial challenges and upheavals to my “normal” way of doing things that parenting thrust upon me. And, really, my fathering paradigm made it easier for me to handle things, because I knew that—based on what “should” be—there was a plan, and everything would fall neatly into place if we would only follow what I had laid out.

The Case for Change

Our parenting paradigms help us deal with all of kinds of challenges and possibilities by applying some sense of order to the world so that we can help keep our kids—and ourselves—safe. And make no mistake, life is scary sometimes. Bad things can happen. People get hurt, and sometimes die. Families become homeless. Children get abused. Look around at the people in your life, and I guarantee you'll find some unhappy people either close to you or on the periphery. Maybe they’re unhappy with their marriage, or their job, or their financial situation. Maybe they are parents and wish they weren’t, or aren’t parents and wish they were. Maybe they feel disrespected, or unloved, or devalued.

But ask yourself this question: If you are a dad who has been unable or unwilling, for whatever valid or nonvalid reason, to let go of your fathering paradigm and grow beyond it to a new level of authenticity, has that caused stress within your family? Has it perhaps caused them to feel misunderstood, unloved, and disrespected at times? I bet it has. And when people are under stress, they will default to their own paradigms that provide them a safe haven from their unfulfilled hopes. And sometimes, intentionally or not, to protect themselves from the distance you have from them, your family may develop a paradigm of their lives that does not include you.

Please don’t let that happen to you. Your partner, and your kids, need and want more from you.

When I look at children, I see people who want nothing more than to live in a world without fear. They demonstrate this by being completely free—talking to whom they wanted about whatever
they wanted, laughing, playing, dressing up, trying new things, making mistakes, creating, singing, dancing—whatever their hearts guide them to do. Some of them predictably want nothing to do with adults at all, but most want their parents and other adults to play right along with them.

At the very heart of parenting the way I want to parent is a commitment to helping our children develop a zest for living and exploring. That’s the very definition of “passion.” We can’t instruct them how to do that; we need to model it for them. As parents, and as fathers especially, we cannot be afraid to wear silly costumes, or sing or dance with our children. We can’t be afraid to spend hours making a wonderful gourmet meal for them because cooking is our passion, even if they hate it. We can’t allow our “need” for a clean house to override their need to build a pile of stuffed animals 6 feet tall. We can’t walk down a wooded path and be oblivious to the ants and caterpillars and deer scat that we see along the way. And we can’t allow our paradigms to set the tone for our lives as parents without questioning the validity and authenticity of those paradigms.

I’ve had a number of close friends and family approach the end of their lives with a few standard regrets: “I wish I had lived/done/loved/tried/questioned the status quo/ laughed more.” No one ever says “I just wasn’t afraid enough.” They wish they had let go of their fears and embraced the wonders of life, the lessons that come from failing, the depth of emotion and feeling that separates humans from the rest. You can’t do that if you’re afraid to fail physically, emotionally, or intellectually.

I believe that parenting and partnering are not commitments that need to be adhered to and sacrificed for. They are privileges to be celebrated and enjoyed. And that, in and of itself, may be enough of a case for change for most people.

**The Tipping Point**

Whatever fears and paradigms you bring into your role as a parent, once that amazing and draining time of the birth is over, your life changes—on the spot, immediately, and permanently.

This “crack in time” is what author Malcolm Gladwell refers to as a tipping point: “the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point…the levels at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable.”
It is the time in which we first choose, consciously or not, whether or not we will put a stake in the ground and allow the paradigms (in which we have found safety) to define the way we parent, or if we are open to allowing the experience of being a parent to alter, and perhaps obliterate, our paradigms. It is not the only tipping point at which we can make this choice. In fact, as the mother and the father each learn and grow more, there can be a nearly infinite number of these points. But it is the first.

I had several tipping points, places in my parenting journey where things were scary and uncertain, and I could have easily said, “No, I am not going to do that. I have my limits, and I have my fears, and I need to follow what I planned.” Not every tipping point was about a big decision. Some were, but most of the time they were about decisions that were seemingly small, but that called into question or refuted one or more of the fathering paradigms that I had built over the years to provide me with a plan and a sense of security. But some of the tipping points in our family were when we were confronted with big decisions:

Co-sleeping, which was foreign to me at first but which we still do 11 years later.

Cotton diapers, which we used and cleaned at home for six years.

A single income, which we have always had.

A focus on family first—to the exclusion of our “standing in society” and to the exclusion of people who put their families second.

Unschooling.

Those were some of ours. But the important thing is not that I had tipping points. The important thing is that you have tipping points. You’ve had them in the past, for sure, but you can have a new one every day. If you are a father who is struggling with your kids; if your partner has become a parent that is different from what you thought they would be, or different from what you think you can be; if your traditional father paradigms are under assault or being questioned, by you or by others; or if you want to be more connected to your children and partner, but are
unsure of how to go about it, you can view today as a tipping point. Right here, right now. You can become a more engaged father and partner, who is open to outcomes rather than attached to one outcome. You can begin to let go of the paradigms that give you safety in times of stress and uncertainty by asking these simple questions.

To what extent will I choose to let my uncertainties and fears control my life? Don’t my children, my partner, and I deserve better?

Yes, you do deserve better. All of you do. There is no rule book for parenting, no training class that can prepare you for all you’ll face. At the end of the day, there is only your heart, your relationships with your partner and children, your ability to recognize the tipping points you see each day, and your desire to be better. And it’s OK that this is all you have, because it’s really all you need.

Moving past our fears into new connections and engagements is not easy. Some days, it seems like two steps forward and three steps back. Sometimes our partners and children may resist it, because our renewed desire and connection is so new to them. And there is no one single best way to reconnect, other than to demonstrate your desire to change and engage—active listening and playing, listening to your heart instead of your mind, participating rather than being authoritative, letting go. Start by asking your partner for help. Then ask your kids for help. Spend less time on the old you, and invest in the you that you wish to become. Share that “aspirational you” with your partner and children so they can adapt and get to know you. Go gently, go softly, but go with a purpose. And take the time to recognize that every interaction is a new tipping point, an opportunity to release yourself from your old fears and paradigms and to re-engage in the present.

You can do this.