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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

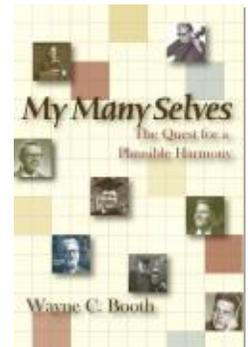
Published by Utah State University Press

Booth, C..

My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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Chapter Fourteen

The Committed Father and Husband, as Lover, Shouts “For Shame!” at All the Other Selves

Suppose I were to dare to believe that one could be a professor and a man! and a writer!

—Lionel Trilling

All unhappy families resemble each other; each happy family is happy in its own way.

—Tolstoy, as he turns in his grave

Parentage is a very important profession; but no test for fitness for it is ever imposed in the interest of the children.

—George Bernard Shaw, *Everybody’s Political What’s What*

To be honest, to be kind—to earn a little and to spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary and not be embittered . . . here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, “A Christmas Sermon”

*. . . poor Brutus, with himself at war,
Forgets the shows of love to other men.*

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

A national poll of scholars’ children, age twenty-two to fifty-five, reveals the shocking fact that 83 percent of them remember their fathers as having “prioritized” research over family.

—Booth Foundation Research Center

Long before Phyllis and I were married, I had developed “indubitable” convictions about what marriage should be—of course, with the male in charge. Many of those views had been changed by the time I found the girl of my dreams. I was sure that she and I could come as close to a perfect, *fully equal* marriage with a perfect family as anyone ever had. And being a good husband and father was even more important than anything else. Sometimes the thought turned into “I must be at least as loving a parent as Mama was, or as Daddy was for six years—and would have been had he lived.”

I was determined, and Phyllis agreed, that the right parental path was to have six children.¹ We both loved children so much that we thought the more the better—up to a point. I had reveled in playing with my aunts’ and uncles’ infants, and I even sometimes nagged the parents about the proper, *loving* way to respond to kids who misbehaved. (“Aunt Zina, you shouldn’t bother Grant so much about not wiping his running nose; he has a bad cold!”)

I was envious of friends who already had children. Whenever I saw Phyllis playing with kids at her nursery school, I felt envious of her techniques and could see that she would be the ideal mother.

However, when we moved into graduate work shortly after marrying, we both soon felt a bit overwhelmed by the demands of the academic world—so much more threatening than we had experienced at BYU. VainB felt surrounded by hundreds of fellow students who were threateningly more learned than he could ever become. And it was clear that even with the GI Bill and Phyllis’s tiny nursery school pay, we did not have enough income to support a child.

Because our main income was the \$82.50 per month provided by the GI Bill, I worked for a year serving lunches at Phyllis’s nursery school, my “salary” simply the noon meal itself. We both remember my expressing anxiety for fear the kids would eat all the food before I got my share; in effect I was

1. I’m surprised to find how many relatives reveal in their memoirs and lives that they set their child-goal at six. One of Phyllis’s sisters has six; four of our nephews and nieces have six. Where did that weird target come from? I once had a Jewish colleague at Chicago who, when congratulated on his sixth child, explained that he and his wife had agreed that they must have six children, one for each of the million who had been killed in the Holocaust. That point wouldn’t arise in Utah, but it’s astonishing these days out there to see how many families are of that size.



Phyllis and I on the Midway, University of Chicago, circa 1947



Utah, 1952, *left to right*, Richie, Phyllis, Mother, Kathie, Lucille, Bruce, Merrill

echoing the seven-year-old boy who, at Grampa Clayton's, for the first time in his life experienced competition at the trough.

So we postponed pregnancy for almost two years—still planning finally to have six children, Phyllis with no clear career plans other than teaching nursery school.

Katherine's birth in December of 1948 was an awakening in two senses. I remember *LOVER* saying often, "The birth of your first child is the greatest of all educational experiences; for the first time in life you realize that you are not Number One. You have been taught the essential lesson of life: some 'other' is more important than you are." (Oh, yes, marrying a genuinely loved one *almost* rivals this Self-measurement; you see your spouse as equal to you in importance. But worth even more? I've worked at that.)

Most of my Selves still embrace joyfully that anti-VainB lesson from life. To have children, and then grandchildren, is a pleasure unrivaled and at the same time an admonition to reject the notion that you are the narcissistic "center." I am certain that if I came to a crisis where I had to risk losing my life to save the life of either daughter or any one of our three grandkids, there



Richie

My three children in Richmond, Indiana



Kathie



Alison

would be not a moment of internal debate. They are more important, not just to me, than I am. I learned that judgment on December 16, 1948, Kathie's birthday, as I first held her in my arms.

The second awakening was considerably less pleasant. Caring for children can be—as I actually put it then sometimes—a pain in the ass. Phyllis would not have expressed our surprising new burdens in that language; she had not been in the army. But after four months of our tending Katherine, in a moment when Katherine was crying inconsolably, what Phyllis said was “Now at last I know why a parent might throw a child out the window.”

Neither of us ever got close to such violent rejection, but I did say, one day when I was diaper-changing or bottle-feeding and felt desperate to be working on my students' papers, “Phyllis, we're just not the kind of people who should *have* children.” To which she replied (and we've joked about it again and again over the years), “Well, if *we're* not, who *is*?”

With all the mixtures of loving bliss and exasperating midnight howling and breast infections, to us one thing was clear: to have six kids would be absurd. To have even one howler and shitter already felt sometimes like more than enough. We ended up finally with three, but Phyllis remembers that after Richard was two, she wanted one more and I opposed it; *two* were enough. I wanted some free time to perform adequately as a totally devoted teacher, and VainB wanted some time for getting ahead.²

I don't now feel the least bit reproachful about not abiding by the implicit six-pack goal. I know too many mothers who have been miserably overwhelmed by having to take on an unfair share of domestic chores with too many children. One Mormon father, whom I've already mentioned, claims to feel guilty about fathering nine; he learned only quite late in life to think about the planet's overpopulation.

What now disgusts me—mildly but genuinely—is that I let my career intrude unfairly on Phyllis's life and on my share of the duties with the kids. Before we were married, I solemnly swore to her that we were to be totally equal. EgalitarianB was proud to proclaim women equal to men in all respects. I had passionately rejected the Mormon male chauvinism, embracing what *felt* like a full version of feminism. Women were (as they are for me now) at least the full equals of men, and men should take on *at least* half of the responsibilities of marriage, realizing women's *at least* equal freedoms. I openly declared that I would be responsible for *at least* 50 percent of the

2. Darling Alison: when you read this, do not take it as the same dreadful message that two mothers we know have shamefully inflicted on their kids, in effect contributing to miserable lives: “I never wanted you.” For one thing, Phyllis wanted you; for another, from the moment of your birth, I wanted *you*.



Publicity photo when I became dean

household chores. She didn't demand that; I volunteered it. (Only later did I learn, as she joked about it, that her definition of 100 percent was far different from mine.)

"Converted" may be the right term for what had happened to me, because it entailed a huge transformation from some of my earlier chauvinist views. I'm shocked to find the following journal entry. In July of 1940, after reading some Schopenhauer, the nineteen-year-old wrote this in his diary.

Schopenhauer's opinions of women are what I have been thinking secretly, for some time, though of course my thoughts have been non-integrated. Women *are* inferior to men in things 'of the mind,' and 'things of the heart' too, I almost believe. In instinct only (mother love, desire for mate, etc) are they possibly superior. Of course, I shall find one superior to all other women, and consequently superior to most men, and shall marry her.

When Phyllis reads a passage like that now, she is contemptuous of the arrogant bastard, and I agree with her. I'm sure it was his Mormon upbringing that had prepared him to accept Schopenhauer's abominable arguments naively. (She and I disagree about whether the boy was attempting clever irony in the final sentence.) If I had been reared in these later decades by Wayne and Phyllis Booth, I never could have considered, even for a moment, accepting Schopenhauer's views. I'm afraid that some Mormon youths are even at this moment being corrupted in that direction.

So after writing like that, how did I fall into a bland version of "premature feminism"? I think it came from having lived with a fabulous mama, a woman obviously superior to most of the men I met and obviously too often mistreated by the male-dominated world. She had actually taught me that when we needed house repair, I should get Uncle Eli to phone the company because when dealing with a woman customer, they always cheat.

What happened, then, to would-be LOVER's promise of 50 percent dutifulness? The answer is too easily predictable: as academic pressures mounted, my domestic contribution lapsed from 50 percent on down and down until, at some points, it came too close to nothing more than doing the dishes. By the time I committed the male chauvinist atrocity that I reported in chapter 5, not even consulting Phyllis as I chose to move us from Haverford College to Earlham College, she was performing probably about three quarters of the domestic work.

A BIT OF PERIPHERAL SELF-EXCULPATION

As I've talked with Kathie and Alison about all that, it's been wonderful to hear them deny that I was as neglectful as memory says I was. They remind me that I did most of the dishes, teaching them how to have fun doing it. I did most of the grocery shopping. And, they reassuringly claim, I did a lot of game playing. At bedtime I sang songs and read to them and made up fairy stories. Kathie reports this episode that I've totally forgotten, where I went a bit too far in the game playing:

We had for some reason a lot of trash to be burnt and you decided to play some games with the flame, maybe to teach us a bit about how oxygen works. So you took a heavy blanket, covered the burning trash, then flipped the blanket up, sending sparks into the sky like a mild explosion. You did it again and again—until suddenly a neighbor woman appeared, furious. "Don't you see that you're landing black soot on my laundry over there!"

But at least I was trying to entertain the kids. As you might guess, I could make a long list of delightful times with them. So I wasn't a son of a bitch

after all, right? I even at one point, considerably later, signed on for a while as a volunteer play therapist in Phyllis's new "Theraplay" program, working with troubled inner-city kids. This can hardly count as "parenting," but doesn't it demonstrate my effort to be "on her side"?

BACK TO THE MAIN STORY

Though I could contrive a favorable version of the loving father, the truth is that for most of each day through most every year, I was teaching or writing. Phyllis remembers—though I can't remember her talking much about it at the time—that *her* life was often in abeyance: her hope for a career had simply been shoved aside by her half-successful husband and her duties with the children. Her friends were mainly my academic associates and their mates. Though she managed to work half-time in the Earlham nursery school, even there she was simultaneously tending our children; and though she came to love many of our common friends—especially those who played chamber music with us—her life often felt *subordinate*.

The results were not tragic, as they too often are when men engage in such unfair treatment of their families. The kids flourished, becoming splendid teachers, masters of storytelling, music lovers, generously effective parents. (As I write in 2005, Kathie, mother of one teenager, has recently been Education Officer at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford. Richard had hoped to become an actor but knew enough about acting as a profession to prepare for English teaching as a fallback. Alison, with two teenage children, is a full professor of English at the University of Virginia.)

Phyllis's career has also been flourishing—I'm almost tempted to say incredibly. Her ideas about child psychology grew, and she took up a career that in my view is now "doing more good in the world" than I have done, as she conducts workshops in South Korea, Finland, England, and so on. And I can honestly and proudly say that VainB does not intrude to express envy that these days she is receiving more lecture requests, more telephone calls, more emails than I am. (But as Phyllis says about all my ironies, that thought did in fact occur to me.)

Could I perhaps console the neglectful father with the thought that her work in Theraplay (she's even doing some autobiographical essays about it) was *improved* by having the duties of parenting shoved upon her? Hardly. What is clear is that I was often blinded by my ambitions, ignoring what my fulfilling this or that professional "assignment"—a three-day lecture trip, say—was doing to her and the kids "back home."

It's not at all hard to find sad evidence of moments when the children were treated as less important than my professional success. Of course, I'll

never know for sure which choices actually harmed them, and I don't know whether they would now say they were harmed by the following choice. But to both Phyllis and me it now seems that we were a bit careless on this one.

1963

I was invited to go to South Africa for four months as part of a "United States–South Africa Leadership Exchange Program" initiated by The American Friends Service Committee; they were hoping to help "cure," or at least abate, some of the atrocities of apartheid. My assignment was to visit schools and colleges lecturing "on the teaching of English."

After a lot of discussion and internal debate about what it meant to our kids to be "farmed out" for four months, I accepted. How could budding scholar VainB refuse—unless he thought a bit harder about what the kids needed during those four months?

Kathie was almost fifteen, and neighbors with children about her age agreed to take her in for the late summer. We shipped Richard, age twelve, and Alison, age nine, off to stay with Phyllis's parents in Long Beach, California. All three then spent the second two months of the four back with my mother, newly married to her second husband, in Pocatello, Idaho.

We had a challenging, interesting, sometimes harrowing, sometimes thrilling time in South Africa, with its beauty and visible misery and almost universal anxiety. Most of those we talked with about apartheid were discouraged liberals; they were all predicting ultimate open warfare, though "we keep hoping it won't occur until after our grandchildren have left." My lectures went well, were printed—adding to the totals in my growing bibliography (terribly important for VainB, right?). We wrote the kids regularly but did not phone them even once, so far as I can remember.

Do my letters reveal any of my anxiety or guilt about having orphaned them for four months? Only obliquely. Too many are irony laden like this one, written to the two in California.

We leave here at 3:00 for the airport, and it's almost beginning to look as if we'll make it. We've just kept steadily at preparations ever since we left you last night. And Tippie [our young dog] looks very happy over there. I think he'll be a good dog from now on, *with no bad behavior ever*. [Only after our return did we learn that the chaos of living in a house that was being remodeled during our absence had worsened the effects of his early months in an animal shelter. Within a few years, after he had bit a neighbor the third time, he had to be "put down," to the children's great distress.] The house looks very empty with you two going away and leaving us like that.

What did we ever do to deserve such treatment? . . . We do miss you—and we promise to feel very very bad all day long every day, more or less, except perhaps Sundays through Saturdays. . . .

You see, I'm raving. . . .

Dad

Those attempted ironies clearly reveal that the guilty thought about "who's to blame" had occurred to me. By transferring it to a joke about *their* guilt—irony that I'm sure they had long since been trained to decipher—the proud father is trying to get himself off the hook.³ Or what about this disguised confession in a letter to Alison?

It's interesting to read of your attempts to resist weeping. In spite of the weeping, you sound basically quite happy. Are you? We surely hope so. It's quite an adventure to go away from home so long at your age, and we wouldn't want you to weep too (I mean too) many times. A few times is (are?) natural, though.

Actually the three kids seemed to do really well during that four-month gap, thanks largely to the generosity of their grandparents. Though Alison was often sad, Kathie responded with a good deal of caring for her. The only real problem from everyone's point of view was that the grandparents discovered more evidence than they'd ever had before about our "misbehavior" as lapsing Mormons. And then they baptized the kids as Mormons, after consulting us for permission.

December 23, 2000, Charlottesville, Virginia

This morning thinking about this memory, I asked Alison, now forty-six, whether she remembers feeling anger or resentment about our abandoning her for four months. She first said she felt and feels no resentment about it at all. But then after a brief pause, she added, "But I just can't imagine myself doing any such thing with Aaron and Emily!" Do I dare now to raise the same question with Katherine? I very much doubt it. Would she have "abandoned" Robin when she was only nine in order to spend four months in South Africa? Surely not.⁴

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3. This is just one of thousands of ironic strokes in my correspondence that seem a bit risky. But all the evidence is that the three had all learned quickly how to detect irony. David Izakowitz, Alison's husband, claims that one of her strongest initial appeals for him was that she knew how to respond to his "Jewish irony."
 4. Editing the manuscript, Kathie writes: "No, I wouldn't have done it. When she was eleven I did put her in boarding school for three months, but I saw her every three weeks."

Such signs of regrettable neglect, rarely criticized at the time, are found throughout the years. But sometimes my correspondence does offer implicit signs of my uneasiness. When Alison was about to turn twelve, she went to a summer camp, and I typed her a two-page, single-spaced letter full of attempts at humor, self-reproach, and invitations into the kind of literary-speculative life that she later joined. (The letter fascinates me now, partly because it seems a bit misguided, indeed confusing, as it might be viewed by a twelve-year-old. Unless you feel very mature and attuned to ironies, just skip this entry.)

Early Summer, 1965

Well, now, look what you got yourself into. There you are, no doubt gaily going about your campy activities, bustling, bouncing along with not a serious thought in your pretty lil head, and here I come along on a hot, convalescent Sunday afternoon, feeling all philosophical and loving and pensive, intruding (with what gaiety and bounce I can muster) into your carefree, bug-ridden life. Though of course by the time you get this letter, you'll no doubt be tired and sweaty and impatient with life, sitting in the cabin, trying to read this in the midst of unlimited racket, in a dim light—will the effect, I wonder, be to make you feel ready for, up to, capable of reading such a marvelous letter-to-a-beloved daughter as this one is undoubtedly going to turn out to be? . . .

[Then, after brief description of the home scene, with brother Richard acting up a bit] Phyllis is looking glum. Makes it hard for father to maintain tone of gaiety and philosophical profundity with which he intended to flood this letter. She goes about scowling a bit, looking like Ophelia going off to drown herself.

[Then after quoting some Robert Graves, dramatizing how he feels after a minor operation and urging her to write a poem] After trying to coax poems out of my Talented Elevener, what do I do now? Why, now I philosophize. I should wax eloquent about Life. But what am I to say about life to Alison, who knows in her bones all that she needs to know to live is right where she is? Could I say that she knows better how to make the right use of the Life she has when she goes to camp than I do when I lie here in the house and stew about not “accomplishing” something? . . . I should be—but see how it comes out, in the wrong form—“accomplishing something”—I should be writing another book, . . . I should be getting some essays written on this, on that, on the other; how am I to make sure that you children—and then I draw myself back and remember that *that's* not the way to do it. The way to do it is the way *you* do it (by it, I mean the whole business of living) when you're not anxious but just wholly With It. . . . Do I ramble?

And I do ramble on and on, playing more such games with her. Some of it would perhaps be redeemable if better written; there is some sane advice. But too much of it sounds like some cheap self-help book. Tacitly throughout is my worry that she'll get caught up in the wrong "American" passions.

What I do like is my emphasis on the advice that I still have to give myself almost daily—a kind of summary of the main theme of *For the Love of It*:

Play games—but only if you play them with people you love because it's fun to be playing games with those people, not when you play them to kill time. Last night Richard and I played some chess and some poker, and both things were Real, not because chess and poker are anything much, but because he's so much fun to be *with*.

And so on—the "devoted father" trying his best to make up with a somewhat self-involved letter for the lack of attention he feels he's been showing to his daughter when she's at home.

I could offer many more examples of how my deep desire to be the best father and husband in history crashed under other ambitions. At this very moment, should I not be writing a loving letter to Katherine and Alison? Is my sense of guilt about neglecting them not justified? Reading a *LIFE* of Thomas Jefferson recently, I was impressed by how much more *written* attention he gave his daughters than I've given mine—though emailing has to some degree revived the intimacy. (We'll never know whether he outclassed me in the amount of eye-to-eye contact.) Should I feel guilty about the fact that Phyllis does almost all of the cooking these days, while I only do the dishes and dispose the garbage?⁵ Or should I simply, honestly, sincerely, express my gratitude for how Phyllis has triumphed over my early dominance?

Recently Phyllis and I exchanged readings of our current work; I read a chapter of hers, she a chapter of mine. The point? Her career has flourished, though belatedly, postponed by my sinful careerism. She has "saved" us both, and she manages quite well these days to keep this arrogant husband/father down to earth.

5. The fact is that a great deal of the household labor is done by a wonderful woman we've hired for nearly thirty years: Jewel Spencer now feels more like a friend, she says, than an employee. EqualityB is a bit embarrassed by that: surely there's something wrong in a world in which anybody is paid a low wage—even if it's higher than the average—to clean somebody else's house. That's hardly how one treats a genuinely close friend. But BourgeoisB triumphs again.



Kathie Booth Stevens and her family—Robert, Robin, and Heather the dog—in the garden of Pembroke College, Oxford



Alison Booth and her family, David, Emily, and Aaron Izakowitz

POSTSCRIPT (BASED ON KATHIE'S EDITING, OCTOBER 2001)

Feeling a bit overwhelmed as I work on revision for the umpteenth time, I open Kathie's envelope containing her editing of this chapter—and I'm almost in tears, tears of joy!

It's a bit disingenuous to flagellate yourself about neglect of us or abuse of Mom. You have probably done much better on both counts than other men of your generation. You should talk more about your family involvement. What did you enjoy/invest in? Fun of camping, telling stories, playing games, chatting, singing. . . .

I'm not going to take her advice, but it thrills me and floods me with memories of moments when we did revel in being together (expanding on my earlier boasting). Her note strongly tempts me to add in accounts of a few of those wonderful episodes, but to do so would belie the main point of this chapter: even if Kathie is justified in her praise, it remains absolutely true, as her phrase "in your generation" reveals, that I should have done more of the good things she remembers. Nobody but VainB would have suffered from the slight diminishment in my total publication record.