

THE FATHER

I Chose

He brought home the bacon, cooked it, and washed the frying pan, while I breastfed two children, day and night, for almost five years. He's the best partner I could have picked to share the toughest job in the world

BY LYNNE MELCOMBE

Four o'clock, a mid-December afternoon, 1980. As the front door swung open, I heard a deep, drawn-out "hi," a word whose exact inflection and intonation would one day be as clearly stamped on my memory as grape juice on a child's new, white T-shirt.

In distant corners of the large house — a group home to five troubled children — a girl and a boy dropped the games and stories that absorbed them, ran toward the voice, and leapt into the man's arms, swinging and wrapping themselves around him like monkeys in a tree.

The expression on his face bespoke bliss.

That was it. The moment I fell in love with the man who would become the father of my children.

Time is funny. It brings some memories into sharper focus, while others fade. Some recollections of my own father, dead for more than twenty years, grow clearer as I get older. Most are blurry, now.

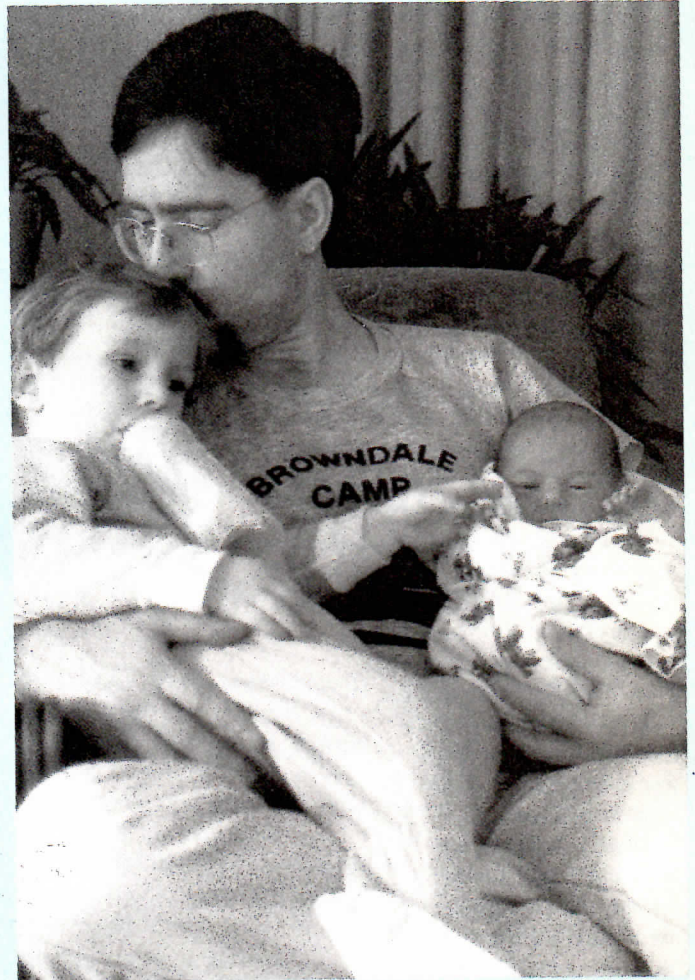
But the man who fathered our four children — two who didn't make it, two who did — is as large as life.

I had arrived at that first group-home job after travelling halfway around the world to escape the grief of an abortion. The pregnancy had clarified for me that I truly did want a child, someday, but only with a man who would be a good father.

When I met that man, he, too, was grieving an abortion and the end of a relationship. The day I fell in love with him — although, at the time, I would have called it lust — was two months before our first date. This gave me time to appreciate what he coyly describes as his childlikeness.

He had taken the job in the wake of his broken relationship, expecting to earn a few bucks and escape to Europe. But once the

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young occupants had taken up residence in his heart, he couldn't leave.

Over the thirteen years since, he's worked with thousands of children. He has a wonderful collection of cards and drawings they've given him. Many still call him. Children are drawn to him, like bees to honeysuckle. When he's with a child, he says, time doesn't exist. He never goes anywhere without a deck of cards and a dozen crayons.

We conceived our first baby in 1984. Intent on a trip to Europe together, he couldn't believe his travel plans were again being derailed by children. Before long, the house was filled with rocking chairs, baby clothes, rainbow wallpaper . . . and then loss.

A Tribute to Father's Day



What seemed like an eternity later, I was pregnant again. We barely breathed for the first thirteen weeks. After that, I would sometimes awaken from naps to find him having intimate conversations with my growing belly.

The day I went into labour, he stayed with me while I cleaned the house like a hamster arranging wood chips into a nest. When I went to the hospital the first time, and returned home, because labour had stopped. Through that night, and the next day, and half of the next night. He stayed with me through most of the forty-two hours, plus Caesarean section and, after escorting his new son to the nursery, a visit to recovery. A few days later, putting my thoughts into perfect words, he said, "I feel as if my whole life has been a preparation for this moment."

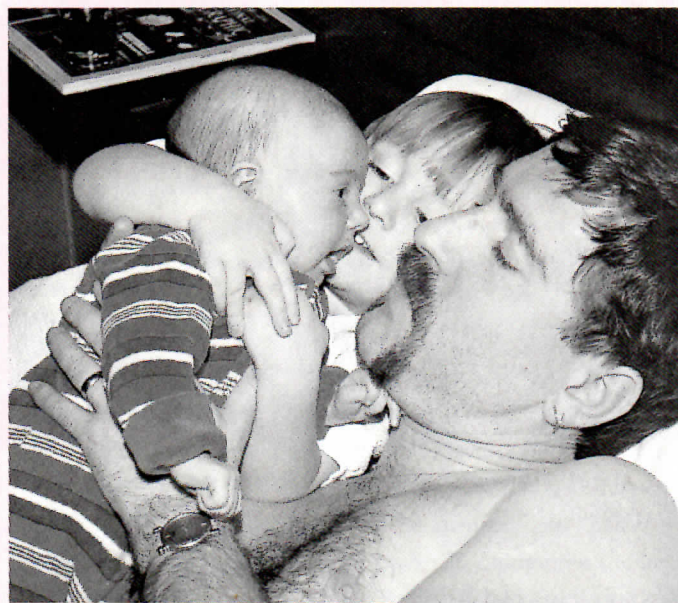
By the time our second came along, my ideas about birthing had evolved. When I first mentioned the idea of home birth, he wasn't thrilled. But he was open enough to talk to people about it, to let himself be convinced that no one can care about an unborn child's well-being the way its mother can. We arranged for midwives.

Afterward, people told me I was brave. Others told him he was stupid, for letting me do that. Nobody told him he was brave, for catching our daughter himself, when she arrived ahead of the midwives. But now, whenever he shows guests around our home for the first time, the tour always includes the spot on the living-room floor where he caught our daughter in his hands, tears washing her squirming, red body.

He isn't a perfect father. There are moments when *childlike* is less accurate than



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childish, days when he seems as absent as I sometimes remember my father being, times when an inner anger catalyzed only by the children fills the house. Saints and martyrs

aren't much fun to live with, and a faultless role model he's not. But the best partner I could have picked to share the toughest job in the world? Without a doubt.

A Tribute to Father's Day

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My father, Dick Melcombe, died more than twenty years ago. I've forgotten a lot about him. But when I see my partner playing with our children, some of my best memories of my dad surface.

He's the dad who brought home the bacon, cooked it, and washed the frying pan, while I breastfed two children, day and night, for almost five years. The dad who drove once a week from Vancouver to Everett, Washington, where I spent five months working Monday to Thursday, so the little one could go on breastfeeding, and the big one wouldn't miss me too much.

He's the dad who relinquishes space in our king-sized bed every night, the better to bond with his young. The one who makes it clear that the choice to work within or outside the home is mine, regardless of the financial consequences.

He's the man who was prepared to do it all over again, last year, when a pregnancy caught us by surprise. The one who set aside his concerns about raising another child on a limited income, in favour of his joy over having a new little person to love. The one whose eyes could not hide his grief, when miscarriage brought our excitement to an abrupt halt.

It's been more than twenty years since my own father died. After all this time, I've forgotten a lot about him. Yet, when I see my partner being a roaring monster while our children and their friends flee in mock terror, playing peek-a-boo with our year-old nephew, cuddling the virtually fatherless child of a friend, as though she were one of our own, or looking longingly at the new object of some other father's adoration, some of the best memories I have of my dad surface.

It doesn't matter how faded the memories are. If it's true that we choose as partners people who are similar to those who raised us, then, surely, I think, I've been twice blessed. ❧

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