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INAFAMILYWAY BY ARLENE ISTAR LEV

On the Road Again

I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM THREE months of traveling, most of the time presenting on LGBT issues at myriad conferences, and some of it vacationing in the lovely places where I was invited to present. One nice side effect of becoming a frequent flyer is the virtual desensitization of my terror of airplanes. Other than a small lingering sense that it is simply illogical to be in a heavy metal aircraft soaring thousands of feet above the earth, I am mostly relaxed enough to sleep or read the entire trip. One not-so-nice effect is that I have a perpetual sense of jet lag that is vaguely reminiscent of having a colicky newborn.

My trips took me to Massachusetts (three times), Philadelphia, Phoenix, Topeka (as in Kansas), San Francisco, and London (as in England). In between traveling I would land for a few days of home and my "day job" - which for me meant seeing clients and teaching adult students - and then I'd be on the road again. The impact on my family: 1) I have barely seen my kids, and when I have, I spent most of the time struggling to keep my eyes open; and 2) my legally unrecognized spousal unit had done all of the work of keeping the house and children organized, fed, dressed, and relatively satisfied.

Just to give you a few highlights of my trip from a professional perspective:

In Topeka, Kansas, home of Reverend Jim Phelps who is famous for protesting Matthew Shepard's funeral, 100 professionals listened with rapt attention to a talk on quality clinical treatment for transgender people and their families. In San Francisco, Dr. Irene Sills and I spoke to a packed room of pediatricians for more than three hours on gender variant expression in children and youth. In Philadelphia, at the Family Pride Symposium, I sat at the feet of lesbian researchers who have been on the frontlines of fighting for lesbian families to retain custody of their children for the past 30 years. Without their courage, and commitment to solid, professional research, it is unlikely that an international movement of queer parenting would have been possible. In London, I met with professionals from across the U.K., and as far off as Israel - places where queer people are only beginning to experience the gay-by boom - and we were able to discuss the transformational power of redefining the word family, across boundaries of both race and gender.

Each place I went I met people whom I had only previously known online, long-term friends whom I had never before touched or heard laugh. Imagine my surprise to discover that my German friend parents two sets of twins (yes, you read that right) and speaks with a British accent, and that the proprietor of the oldest gay bookstore in London had "heard" I was in town. In the global queer village, I found

our families thriving: from transmen who have birthed the children they father, to gay men who fought the homophobic system to adopt their multiracial children, to lesbian moms who rear their children in extended families.

In San Francisco, my partner and I sat with our two children, and a gaggle of lesbian moms and their children whom I've known for nearly a decade on a lesbian MOMS email list, eating Dim Sum and being awed by how quickly our babies have become children, and our children are becoming teens. The day was only partially marred by a fight between two of the younger children, ending with one hurling the ultimate insult at the other: "You jug of peanut butter." It is so hard to give children consequences when you can't stop laughing.

Speaking of how quickly time passes; for the last week of this three-month traveling period, my partner and I spent time vacationing in London, celebrating our ten-year anniversary. Celebrating is not a simple thing for parents. Of course, the week we were away was officially the first week of summer vacation, when school closed and before any of the camps had begun. Of course, the day I was invited to keynote a conference in London was the same day as my younger son's graduation from kindergarten. Of course, I missed my older son's flute recital and my younger son's first gymnastic routine - the irony of presenting on LGBT parenting during the last week of school.

Organizing a week away logistically involved the assistance of four other families and my mother-in-law. Each day was planned out, including sleepovers, playdates, pet care, menu planning, down to the nitty-gritty details involving showering (lessons learned from previous experiences: if you don't actually schedule in children's showers, they manage to convince everyone that have already taken one, thank you). This was all mapped out on a large schedule emailed to a number of families, including pick-ups, drop-offs, phone numbers, emergency contacts, and medical information. One woman introduced herself to my mother-in-law as "Tuesday and Thursday morning pick-up and drop-off."

A relaxed vacation depended on a complex and intricate organizational process, which balanced our responsibility of keeping the children safe, and our need for a few quiet days of sleep and grownup play. Luckily, with the help of friends - on both sides of the pond - we were able to accomplish this goal.

I'm not sure what the next decade of parenting will bring, but for the rest of the summer you can find me in the garden, watering both the cucumbers and the children, watching them grow bigger and juicier, under the watchful eyes of a mother glad to be safely grounded. ▼

➔ Arlene Istar Lev is a family therapist living in Albany, New York, and is the author of *The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Book* and *Transgender Emergence*. She and her partner Sundance are the parents of Shaiyah, age 10, and Eliezer, age 6. You can reach her through www.choicesconsulting.com.