

# Buds Bloom in a Second Spring: Storying the Male Voices Project

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## Abstract

This essay chronicles a tale of personal and academic transformation triggered by the rich mentoring spirit of Bud Goodall. Bud encouraged me discover how a research project on male executives and work-life balance was intricately intertwined with my familial and personal experiences. The essay describes a “Second Spring”—a period of reawakening after the full cycle of ethnographic seasons in which researchers identify blind spots in their scholarship and ways of being. In this Second Spring, I find myself transforming my commitments to gender equity from a place of evidence collection and self-righteous upset to a place of dialogic conversation and choice.

## Keywords

autoethnography, transformation, ethnography, narrative, writing as method of inquiry

“But that’s not fair!” I exclaim, stamping my 9-year-old foot. My face flushes crimson, almost the shade of our family room’s red shag carpet.

“Sarah, of course it’s fair. It’s logical, it’s rational, and it’s just the way it is,” says my father in his confident lawyerly tone. My older brother, Van, 3 years my senior, glances over but seems more interested in his bowl of ice cream. As usual, he stays out of it.

“But, but . . .” I continue, feeling to the core of my 80-pound being that I just KNOW my father must be wrong. He must be wrong. He must. Why would he declare, in such matter of fact terms, “If a man and a woman were equally qualified for a job, *of course* I would hire the man.”

I love and respect my Dad. I yearn for his approval—to know that I am good enough, worthy enough, and as smart as Van even though he gets higher scores—just barely—on our standardized achievement tests. I am angry and insist that Dad further explain himself. “But, why?”

“Because,” Dad sighs, “a woman is much more likely to go off and get pregnant and be absent from the job. It’s nothing personal. It’s just the way things are.”

“But, but . . .” I try to explain how this just doesn’t make sense. What if she didn’t go and get pregnant? What if she didn’t get married or found a husband who stayed home? Even if she did get pregnant, doesn’t she deserve to have the chance at the job?

Dad reaches down and tousles my blond wavy locks. “Sarah, sweetie-pop, I know that’s your *opinion*, but you just need to realize that I have much more *knowledge* about this than you.” He turns back to the newspaper.

I feel like screaming. I feel like hurling myself into his chest and saying,

Can’t you see me? Can’t you see that when you say things like that it makes me think I can’t have a say? That I’m not good or smart or worthy of your love? That it makes me think you love and respect Van more than me? Because he’s a boy? Don’t you love me? Wouldn’t you hire me?

But instead of screaming and arguing in what I know will be a lost fight with my articulate, logical, lawyer Dad, I gulp down the anger and redirect my self-righteous energy into turning cartwheels in the living room.

In that moment, and in many other moments laid one on top of another for the next 30 years, I make a decision. I decide that I will *show* my Dad. I will show him that I can and will be just as smart and successful as he is—as my older brother is. He will see. I can’t show him or tell him now. But someday, somehow, I will.

So, you say you wouldn’t hire a woman?

So, you wouldn’t hire someone like me, huh, Dad?

That’s just stupid, and *I’m going to show you.*

\* \* \* \* \*

And, so, I go on and live *my* life, in *my* way—or so I thought—erasing from conscious thought this conversation and its resultant decision (that being a man, or at least not pregnant = success = my Dad’s love). In my work and play,

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I am a striver, crafting an identity that values hard work, discipline, achievement, and approval. Along the way, I ignore boyfriends, work incessantly during vacations, and count as leisure grading at coffee shops. It's an identity I sporadically resent, yet consistently remanufacture and refuse to release.

Over the years, I collect certificates, plaques, lines on the vita—a constant stream of reassurance that never quite satiates. And, I always find ways to share my latest academic achievements with my Dad. Nonetheless, most of our long-distance telephone conversations end up as heated discussions about politics, religion, or gender relations. I have developed viewpoints that feel diametrically opposed to his. I've placed my Dad into more ugly boxes than I can stack: sexist, conservative, provincial, narrow-minded.

I do not consider the shag-carpet decision I made to "show him." I do not see how I consistently enter our conversations armed with evidence, waiting for moments where I may need to unleash it. I do not link my "work-first" identity with a resolution I made as a little girl. Neither do I think about any of this when, mid-career, I begin to research work-life balance.

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In 2006, I helped found a consortium of scholars called "The Project for Wellness and Work-Life" at Arizona State University. Among other issues, we were interested in better understanding why women's progress in organizational leadership and pay increases had stalled from its late-20th century growth (Babcock & Lavaschever, 2003).

As we perused the work-life literature (e.g., Buzzanell, 2005; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Medved, 2007), we noticed that most of it focused on women's stories from women's points of view. Meanwhile, men dominated gatekeeping

organizational positions, retaining power to directly impact work-life policies, promotion opportunities, and organizational culture (Corra & Willer, 2002). Given this irony, we figured that a combination of interviewing high power men and making use of a male researcher to conduct the interviews might reveal important insights.

And, indeed, through the study we found that, although male executives largely endorsed equity for men and women in the public sphere, in the private sphere they preferred traditional gendered roles. Similar to my Dad, many wanted their wives, daughters, and daughter-in-laws to stay home and take care of the children and home. We found that this viewpoint transferred, perhaps unintentionally, into aversively sexist attitudes at work—which shed light on women's continuing work-life challenges. We made the argument that traditional gender viewpoints ultimately hurt organizations in recruiting and retaining talented female workers. After receiving a revise and resubmit (Tracy & Rivera, 2010), we decided to recruit some internal reviews.

\* \* \* \* \*

I send an email to my boss and friend Bud Goodall, asking if he'd be willing to take a look over the manuscript. He is a perfect internal reviewer because not only is he a qualitative writing expert, but he also agreed to be one of our study's participants.<sup>1</sup>

My co-author Kendra mentions that she is sending the article to her Dad and brother as a type of "member check." Without much thought, I decide to send it to my father too. I don't know exactly what I expect. At the least, Dad's a sure bet for identifying holes in our logic.

Then I wait for the responses.

In addition to line-by-line editing and comments, Bud emails me this:

Overall comments: I appreciate the careful treatment of the interview data and explicit coding that gives your arguments support. However, I wonder if writing the article this way doesn't in some ways constrain the story you want to tell. Of course, this is me and I'm interested in "the story." Sometimes I feel like your story gets lost in your detailed treatment of the interviews. As a result, the essay is awfully long and seems to repeat the same basic message—that how successful men live their lives in private is often reflected in their attitudes toward work-life balance issues, and that organizations are not particularly friendly to women, particularly women with children.

For me, these findings are not terribly surprising. But the lack of a compelling story makes it difficult for me to remain engaged in the arguments (given that the first half of the paper reflects widely held views in the literature, and the second half widely held views, however un-evolved, among men, etc.).

Maybe that is because I am a man and guilty as charged and fully implicated in the data, but when I try to think what I would recommend, I think you are foregrounding analysis at the expense of the narrative that would move us to action or to think differently instead of reinforcing what people on both sides of the issues you raise already believe is true. Now that might not be a bad thing for this journal [*Management Communication Quarterly*], which is not intended as a slight to the journal or to the hard work you've done. But, sadly, for me there just isn't anything in this article that strikes me as so newsworthy because what you want to say seems buried under the weight of the arguments and data. I could probably read your conclusions first and skip the rest of the article and I would still believe you. The folks you want to reach are probably guys either like me or to the right of me who are not necessarily going to be moved by codes; they are going to be moved by stories.

So what is the story you are telling, and why is it important?

So, that's what I think. Probably you will turn it into another award-winning article in short order by simply ignoring what this old, wrong white man who keeps his wife in bondage has to say. Good luck with your final draft!;) Bud.

I smile, appreciating Bud's humor, self-deprecation, and stellar advice.

Then, I receive an email response from my Dad. As my mouse hovers over the link to open the email, I can feel my heart beating in my ears. I press, and proceed.

The email is filled with capitalizations, bolded letters, and exclamation marks. I read that "the entire premise of the paper is ERRONEOUS." My eyes blur over his argument, which basically suggests that Americans have become more materialistic and that if they could learn to do more with less—like they did in *his* generation—then women would not need to work. His email's final sentence switches to third person. Perhaps critique is easier that way:

Perhaps I am missing something . . . is the gal who wrote this aware of a situation in which she believes a two wage earner family is necessary? My guess she is just so young that she has a very warped view of what the word "necessary" means.

I fume. How dare he question my carefully researched facts and clearly articulated analysis? His response sends me spiraling into the same physical manifestation of frustration I felt on that red shag carpet.

Nonetheless. It's different now. I have more than a prepubescent girl's opinion. *Now, I have the evidence.* I gather my arguments, calm myself, and respond: I concede that he

is right that "overwork" among Americans is directly linked to our fondness for consumerism (Schor, 1998). Yet, I provide statistic after statistic, showing him that, for many families, working is not a "choice" due to their financial or marital situation. I sign off with the completely inauthentic, "This is really helpful feedback and will help me nuance the argument. Keep it coming." The words disguise the hot contempt pulsing through my veins.

Similar to that little girl who turned cartwheels, I escape, angry adrenaline fueling my trail run. As my jogging shoes hit the rocky path in a meditative beat, I mull over potential other responses to Dad.

What is my goal here? I breathe hard and try to *figure it out*.

Did I think that sending this paper to Dad would change his ideas about women in the workplace? How much of my scholarship and my life has been motivated by proving my father wrong? Ruminating allows me to ignore the lactic acid building in my legs. Dear god. Maybe my mind *is* warped. I suddenly realize that the paper may have more aptly been titled, "I'll show you, Dad!" My face streams with hot tears, making dusty rivulets down my cheeks. I feel confused, angry, and frustrated. Questions swirl. What do I do next?

Several hours later, I turn to my computer trying to make sense of it all. I bang the following into a fresh file, my fingers barely able to keep up:

So, I got a response from Dad about the male voices paper. I'm feeling super defensive and regretful and scared of what's to come. I'm playing through all the arguments and counter-arguments in my mind. I make an extremely strong and logical argument in the article, based off of demonstrated literature, a carefully designed and executed study, and meticulously analyzed and interpreted data. So, when his email is one of attack, I feel self-righteous and am ready with tons of counter-evidence.

I also am wondering whether there was a little unconscious thing inside of me that should have known all this before I sent it. Was sending it just a big "Fuck You" to Dad? Is this whole thing a commentary on my own subjective position—that I wish that I could have both a great organizational life and a life filled with children and a spouse who takes care of them? And, meanwhile, I just work myself to death?

So, I've sent the paper to Dad, and I am imagining him as extremely pissed off. I don't want to create a huge problem in our relationship. I'm feeling tons of regret and fear.

I guess there's still a big part of me that longs for his approval and acceptance.

I finally step away from the computer, pour myself a glass of wine, pet the cats, and resolve to respond by not responding, at least for right now. I try to take his comments in stride—to pay attention to the constructive ones and try to ignore the rest.

Over the next few days, I reflect on my own anxiety and preoccupation about my Dad's response. Certainly, all this must have much more to do with myself and my own issues, concerns, and insecurities than it does with anger at my Dad.

Maybe *this* is the story that Bud's talking about.

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Because Bud is not only a boss and colleague, but also a friend, I share my Dad's response to the internal review and my confusion. Over sack lunches, he provides advice and tries to cheer me up. Later that day, Bud also emails me with this:

Sarah: I got to thinking. The emotional level of intensity in your dad's response might be related to how much he sees himself in the essay, and whether or not he thinks you might be indirectly commenting on his contributions to the domestic life in your home and/or how his work-life was organized vis. a vis. women and women with children. That's the touchy thing about this line of research.

I know that some of my comments to your paper are probably defensive—no one likes to think they treat others unfairly or that we are harboring biases that we thought we'd long ago overcome—but I think it gets a whole lot messier the closer to home you get. Family stories are, well, complicated.

Cheers, Bud

I think more about Bud's advice, and decide to take another look at his recommendations about "finding the story" in *Writing the New Ethnography* (2000) and *Writing Qualitative Inquiry* (2008). I then write him this:

Bud:

You're definitely on to something here. I've been thinking a lot about you, writing, and the research. I kind of got teary and thought about how my work in this area might feel like a betrayal—to a lot of people (like my Dad) but also to you.

I say this because you've been so helpful along the way in all my endeavors, and here you offered to be part of this project. Also you are definitely among the more progressive guys in the study. But, in the paper, you're kind of lumped in with the rest, and the major story line is one of critique. So, I'm finding myself in this conundrum. I want to show the issues that still remain for women, and I also want to be fair.

There's something that is nagging at me about the piece . . . something that is increasingly difficult to ignore with comments from affected audience members, like you and my Dad.

I was especially taken with the following in your *The New Ethnography* on p. 14 where you point out Wayne Brockriede's comment that "the attitude the writer has toward his or her reader is one of love rather than domination and control. It is more *dialogic*, less singularly red-faced; more *dialectical*, less confrontational." I also like, on p. 37, "If you met yourself at a party, would you like who you were?"

When I ask myself these questions in terms of this essay, I struggle with the answers. I think the piece, as is, could be read as the author having an attitude of red-faced domination (e.g., see, look at the data, there are clear viewpoints evidenced here that result in hurting women! The data proves it!!). I'm not sure I'd like to hang out with this type of author at a party.

Also, as I've reflected on the piece, I'm coming to realize that this may be the most autoethnographic thing I've ever written . . . clothed in layers of past literature, a clever research design, and a painstaking data analysis.

While I've been successful in the public sphere, I feel less successful in my personal relationships. There is part of me that somehow wants to find accountability with someone/something other than myself for feeling as though my organizational success is accompanied by my less than stellar success in the private sphere. Occasionally, I think I'd like to be a mom and wife—but only if I could do so in the same way it seems possible for the male executives in this study to be fathers and husbands while also being successful employees. That doesn't seem possible. I tell myself, that this impossibility can't only be my fault. Right? There is someone else to blame.

Anyhow, all for now. Thanks for all your support.

Cheers, Sarah

\* \* \* \* \*

So, circling back to Bud's question: what is the story here?

First, we have the analysis of male bias. But, as Bud said, we already knew about that. So, what is the *story*—not just the evidence? Well, finding that would mean I'd also need to find some increased credibility in my own voice, and take seriously the idea that my view on the world could create something significant, with or without lots of knowledge, facts, and evidence undergirding it.

So, do I have here some sort of autoethnography? Perhaps by sharing my own work-life struggles and history, readers could better understand theoretical issues of gender and balance in the workplace. Indeed, autoethnographic research demonstrates the power of sharing our personal narratives as a method of shedding light on larger issues outside of ourselves (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000).

Spring is an opening to the evidence that has been left hiding under the winter's snow of the reality of what we did in the summer and fall. The only alternative we have is to clean it up, since it begins to be in plain view.

Therefore, each spring we are given the opportunity to become more consciously aware of the areas where we are most likely to have blind spots or habitual distorting or self-denying filters. This is done by reviewing the areas where life experience has shown us patterns of attachment, resistance, identification, and defense (including trauma).

Wow. And, so it's in this Second Spring that I find myself now. It's now that I think I can begin to attend, meaningfully, to Bud's question of, what is the story here?

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The story is one of Sarah Tracy encountering a "Second Spring"—a period of reawakening after the full cycle of ethnographic seasons; a period where I am becoming conscious of blind spots that have filtered my relationships and my scholarship. Through my conversations with Bud, I began to see how the male voices study grew out of and was tinged with my own deep-seated sadness and resentment. As much as the male voices study was about trying to shed light on women's 21st-century work-life challenges, its gritty undercurrent storied a red-faced little girl trying to gain approval from her Dad and find justification for her own work and life choices.

The story is also about how I lost the confidence to story my own story and instead let evidence run the game. This is unfortunate because, as Bud so eloquently explains, stories are paramount for illuminating problems and moving both the author and reader to think or act differently:

However, I feel as though the story I tell here is almost opposite to what we normally describe as autoethnography: I came face to face with something very personal and subjective only *after* and through an empirical study of issues that originally felt external, outside of me, and "over there" with male executives.

So, what else could this be?

I reviewed Amira De La Garza's research about the "four seasons" of ethnography (González, 2000). Her work suggests that our research is cyclical. It includes the Spring of preparation (e.g., the time in which researchers first conceive of and design the project), the Summer of data collection (the interviews), the Fall of data analysis, and the solitary Winter of writing. What I see unfolding here—that connects to De La Garza's work—is that after the Winter of writing, publishing, and sharing of research, Spring comes again. Over email, Amira shared this insight:

The power of the story is its ability to change your life. And not just yours, but other people's lives as well. Perhaps you identify with a character, or share a similar challenge. Perhaps you learned how to imagine your life differently, and *better*. Maybe it set you on a path of discovery that led to realization of what you wanted to do, or become, or whom you wanted to be with or give your life for. (Goodall, 2008, p. 13)

Indeed.

In this Second Spring, I have finally recognized my own responsibility in creating the resentment, cult of achievement, and strained relationship with my Dad. In that shag rug carpet conversation years ago, I had interpreted my Dad as declaring that women could not simultaneously be pregnant and be successful. And from that I had created the fiction that I could never be as respectable or lovable as my brother or as men in general—especially without extraordinary professional achievement. I had lived my life constrained by this interpretation, consistently striving for approval and secretly unsure whether I could ever be enough.

I created all this, and then lived my life, consistently recreating it and going to lengths to empirically prove it. I lived

as though my fiction were true. In writing *this* story, though, and reflecting on it through this Second Spring, I have realized my own part in its creation, which leaves me able to see that I can recreate differently if I so choose.

In the last several years, I've done a lot to let go and forgive—my Dad, and myself. I have one father. I choose to love him for exactly who he is and exactly who he isn't. I now listen to my Dad in a new way, focusing on the things that strengthen our relationship rather than on the ones that tear us apart. I'm edified by the following from R. Bruce Hyde (1994) on listening authentically:

A human being *is* a listening; listening is not something that human beings *do*. One is never simply an empty vessel, a passive receptor into which another pours the content of his or her speaking. Rather, each of us at every moment is always already listening in a particular way . . . that determines the way the world occurs for us. (p. 184)

At 9-years-old, I made a decision that my Dad was wrong, that my story and opinion wasn't credible, and that I would show him. From that locus, I created an identity as an achiever and evidence collector. I listened to him (and to many people) armed with evidence to battle inequity or bias. That, in turn, determined the way the world occurred to me—as unfair, sexist, and something I needed to fight.

Even though I knew from a scholarly level about the power humans have in conversation and listening to socially construct, and that writing is a way of knowing and (re)creating (Goodall, 2008), this knowledge had not transferred to my practice. Indeed, I had made a very resolute decision about the way Dad/men unchangeably *are*. Doing this kind of thing is not unique to me. As B. Hyde and Bineham (2000) suggest in terms of the communicative social construction of reality,

While many of us *understand* this theory, far fewer of us *live* it. . . . We spend much of our lives struggling with the way things “are,” rather than savoring the malleability that a constitutive view of language, fully distinguished, might lend our world. (p. 214)

And, as Bud reminds us, writing is not just a way to represent evidence. Rather, we can write our way into new ways of being.

Now in the budding bloom of this Second Spring, I have not surrendered a focus on equitable gender relations. However, I “find it valuable to differentiate between *being right* and *being committed*. Being right about one's position on an issue makes other positions wrong; being committed to an authentic inquiry, on the other hand, gives room to engage productively with other points of view” (B. Hyde & Bineham, 2000, p. 217). I now feel less compelled to demonstrate and prove the difficulty of women's work-life challenges, and more interested in writing about the malleability

of such challenges and narrating new possibilities that might inspire transformation.

Furthermore, I find myself concerned less with *understanding* or *deconstructing* work-life balance, and more concerned with *dwelling* within it, as a scholar and whole person. I still work a lot, but the motivation has shifted. When I frame hard work as my free choice rather than as a life sentence required to win approval, the resentment disappears. I take responsibility for the full spectrum of its results on my relationships, health, well-being, and professional success.

Based on Bud's advice and Amira De La Garza's urging, I also see how the gestalt of what we studied in the male voices project and its resultant Second Spring journey is a holograph of the entire topic of work-life research. The personal anger, hurt, and resentment I felt as a little girl; my Dad's defensiveness; and the complicated family story, all are dimensions of the deep patterns and structures that flow through the subject of navigating work and life choices.

In telling this narrative—motivated and constructed through interaction with Bud Goodall—I hope to honor Bud's sage advice, friendship, and wisdom. The beauty and promise that comes in writing a Second Spring may hopefully serve as a “narrative blueprint” for living—a “personal tale made public with the intent of inspiring identification among audience members seeking a narrative model to help guide future attitudes and behaviors” (Fox, 2007, p. 9). I hope this story helps others who are working out relationships with friends and family in a package called scholarship. People largely interpret and understand the world and themselves through the stories and language available (Lawler, 2002), and “new narratives offer the pattern for new lives” (Richardson, 1995, p. 213).

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## Note

1. After considering the multiple ethics of anonymity and greater good, I chose, here, to disclose Bud's inclusion in the study. This fact is central to "the story" here that he encouraged me to tell. Furthermore, I believe he would be comfortable with others knowing about his inclusion.

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