2013

Bread-winning and Bread-baking: On Being a Provider

Abigail Rine
George Fox University, afavale@georgefox.edu

Bread-winning and Bread-baking: On Being a Provider

Abigail Rine

If you were to walk through the back door into our mudroom, you would be greeted by a row of deep red onions dangling from green stems, strung across the room like a row of purple Chinese lanterns.

If you were to continue upstairs, into our office, you'd find some usual office-y things (computer, desk, bookshelf), but you would also see a box of fluffy golden chicks gathering under the red glow of a heat lamp, as well as a bucket of pear cider sitting beside a jar of red wine, both in the throes of fermentation.

Before that, before even getting to the back door of the house, you'd have to walk by eight garden beds, several still overflowing with kale, celery, tomatoes (all kinds!), cabbage, squash. The zucchini, green beans, sugar peas, and broccoli have all been torn up by now, their lodgings cleared for a winter crop of beets, lettuce, carrots, onions, and yet more kale, cabbage, and broccoli.

Skirting the garden beds you'll find a chicken run that extends from a coop in a L-shape along the back fence. Grape vines, now fruit-free, wind themselves through the fence of the run, and, inside, three hens loiter under towering sunflowers, waiting for falling seeds.

Under the edge of our roof, flanking each side of our patio, sit two large barrels that drink the runoff from the gutters; these barrels become engorged in the rainy Oregon winter, and then, in the dry summer, quench the thirst of the garden.

All of this fecundity occurs in the back part of our suburban lot. Much as we'd like to, my husband and I don't live in the country. We're suburban homesteaders, working with what we've got, often to the perplexity of our neighbors.

I say, "we," but that really isn't fair. Aside from occasionally helping with the harvest, collecting eggs, or locking the chicken coop at night, I have done nothing to make all this happen. My husband, Michael, grows the vegetables, raises the chickens, collects the rainwater, brews the cider, cooks the meals, bakes the bread – he even makes our lavender-scented soap – and, since the school year began last week and I returned to full-time work, he does this all while being the primary caretaker of our nine month-old son.

And yet, despite all he contributes to quite literally keeping his family fed and happy, to many Michael does not count as a "provider." Or, at least, he doesn't fit what seems to have become the widespread definition of the term.

♦♦♦

I grew up in an evangelical Christian subculture that was cocooned, thanks to geography, within the LDS (Mormon) subculture. In this nesting doll of conservative religions, "provider" was shorthand for the God-ordained duty of the man to work outside the home and make money to support his family. The woman, in contrast, was meant to burrow into domesticity and learn the

sacred arts of homemaking. She could work hard in the house – cooking, cleaning, laundering, and feeding and clothing and caring for the children – yet her work did not fall under the canopy of "provision." She could be a mother, a wife, a homemaker, but not a provider. She might make the bread, but the one who wins it, he "provides."

I still catch myself assuming that this shorthand is limited to the circles of my upbringing – but now I have come to understand that this is simply not true. The connotative meaning of the word provider is fairly universal in contemporary America, even in the broader, more secular culture that ostensibly has less rigid gender roles.

Take Walter White, my favorite television anti-hero. (Because, let's be honest, everything I am thinking about these days has some connection to Breaking Bad.) Even the scientific, nonreligious Mr. White roots his identity in this moneymaking notion of provision; his desire to provide for his family in the face of a terminal cancer diagnosis drives him to earn the big bucks cooking methamphetamine.

I remember one particular scene from a third-season episode, in which Walter begins to suspect that his meth-cooking ventures might actually cost him his family. Gus Fring, his kingpin boss, knows exactly how to manipulate Walt away from his self-doubt, when he says: "What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family. … When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man."

This exchange, which proves effective and lures Walt deeper into the drug world, demonstrates the power of the provider label, and also how it is a fundamentally gendered term. Walt's terrifying (and riveting) characterization is an extreme but potent example of how our cultural ideals and expectations of men are tangled up with post-industrialist, capitalist values.

♦♦♦

There is plenty of irony at work here. If Michael, earned a paycheck by cooking professionally for strangers as a chef, instead of cooking for his family for free, he would be seen as a provider. Similarly, if our income stemmed from his green-thumbed work, he could be considered a farmer instead of a mere gardener. The implication is clear: when domestic work is professionalized, only then can it be seen as masculine.

It is no doubt because of these gendered ideals that, when people inquire about Michael's situation, I catch myself wanting to use terms like "farmer" and "homesteader" rather than the inert "stay-at-home dad," which makes it sound like Michael just sort of lounges around the couch all day, never leaving the house. Even the acronym, SAHD, is a total downer. Most of these inquirers respond positively to the fact that he is a primary caregiver, but their follow-up

questions – "Does he like doing that?" "Does he plan to go back to work soon?" – carry the assumption that, as a man, being at home must feel like an odd fit, a step down.

I recently had a friend remark that men receive undue praise for completing domestic tasks, and I agree with him in part. It is still too often an unexpected surprise when a man stands up to clear the plates at a dinner party instead of his female partner. But something shifts, I think, when that domestic work becomes full-time and completely supersedes a career beyond the home – thus pushing the man beyond the traditional sphere of provision.

♦♦♦

This is not to knock the breadwinners, of course – that happens to be my shtick these days. I'm well aware that my paycheck bankrolls Michael's backyard homesteading efforts. The work I do is important, and it's good that our culture recognizes that. The problem is that the work Michael does – which is also the full-time work of millions of women and increasing numbers of men – is viewed as less important, and for those men who choose to do it instead of pursuing a career, it's seen as compromising their masculinity.

And yet, despite this baggage, I like the word provider. There is something raw and weighty about it, something that captures the essential significance of parenthood. The fundamental role of any parent is to provide for his or her children, whether than means earning an income or growing and preparing food or washing a load of rank diapers. I want to keep the word provider, but somehow detach it from its gendered, monetary roots. I want to reclaim it, to crack it open and fill it with new, expansive meaning that extends beyond the capitalist model connecting manhood to moneymaking and devaluing work traditionally done by women.

Ultimately, despite our cultural conflation of manliness and earning power, both breadwinning and breadmaking are inseparable gestures of provision. The money I earn? Michael makes it count. Michael turns the straw-money into edible, life-giving gold. And this, perhaps, is provision in its purest form.