

Say goodbye to Mr. Mom

That's OK — you won't miss him

By Donald N.S. Unger

Ispent the first few weeks of the current school year attempting to coordinate one or more overlapping car pools. Quintessential parental work, to my mind: there are elements of scheduling and organization balanced — or thrown out of balance — by a rich broth of interpersonal issues, the fragile egos of both the parents and the children (and, of course, that of the coordinator) at the top of the list.

It was a fair fight and, in the interest of full disclosure, I'll confess here that I essentially failed. I am the Car Pool Czar no more. My reign was cut tragically short, and I've had to unstitch those snazzy epaulettes that I had, a tad prematurely, sewn onto the shoulders of all my shirts.

It was a fair fight, though; there was no sabotage. No one tried to get me to — oh, I don't know — transport a llama, for example.

Not as lucky were the hapless fathers who appeared in the first (and perhaps last) five episodes of NBC's summer reality show "Meet Mr. Mom," in which mothers were whisked off to spa vacations so that the audience could see the kind of hilarity that ensues when men are put in charge of children. They had all kinds of curves thrown at them, including the addition of a llama and a goat to an impromptu kids' party. Well, Moms would all know what to do in that situation, wouldn't they?

Andean Moms, perhaps.

I don't generally watch reality shows so — personal and political prickliness to the side, just for a moment — what was particularly interesting to me was the remarkable degree to which these shows were scripted. How much this was accomplished via

editing versus how much was accomplished because the participants, viscerally understanding their parts in the narrative arc, simply "knew their lines" by heart is an open question. But know their lines they did.

The story in each episode is essentially the same.

A large SUV zips through streets lined with McMansions, bearing down on two unsuspecting families. Their naïvete about what is soon to befall them is odd, given that we see and hear part of this from inside the target houses, which, along with their occupants, have been unobtrusively wired for sound and video transmission.

A muscular young man delivers a scroll to whoever answers the door. The families assemble for the reading: Mom has 15 minutes to pack and leave; Dad will be in charge of the house and the kids; the two fathers must compete for the title of Mr. Mom.

Again, they all know their lines.

The mother looks smug and says, "he doesn't know what he's in for now."

Sometimes she cries.

The father looks a little nervous, but keeps saying, "we'll be fine."

One of the kids moans, "we're doomed."

And they're off!

The families compete in a variety of tasks, usually with serious time constraints on preparation: hold a garage sale, throw a sleepover party, cook a formal dinner for guests.

But the garage sale is burdened by the presence of a cow; the llama and the goat show up for the party; and before dinner can be cooked and served, it turns out that the kitchen has been emptied not only of all food, but of plates, silverware, and cooking implements, as well.

Not to worry, a madcap shopping spree at one of the show's sponsors ensues, as the clock continues to count down.

A lot of this is "I Love Lucy," more slapstick than reality, with men in the role of candy maker, as the assembly line cranks steadily out of control: chocolates everywhere — the kids will help with that! — and only so much you can stuff in your mouth at one time to try to catch up.

It's television, it's funny, and so what?

But — here comes the prickly politics again — it is really the *mothers* who are being hurt here more than the fathers. I am offended, but I'll recover.

The moral that undergirds the show is that it would be *irresponsible* for women to "let" men do more around the house, particularly with their children.

At the end of each show, the fathers say one of two things — sometimes both — to show that they've learned an important lesson: "I'm really going to *help out* more around the house" and "I don't ever want to do this again."

Put the emphasis on that last phrase; because that's what they *really* mean. But note as well the use of language in the first phrase: I can "help out" around your house — an unexpected act of generosity — I'm not "helping" when I do things in my own house; I'm being a parent, a homeowner, a husband, a partner. In similar fashion, I can "babysit" your children, but if I'm taking care of my own daughter that's not the right word to apply. She is my flesh, my blood, my heart; of course I take care of her.

The language tells us everything we need to know: We're not meeting Mr. Mom each week, we're saying goodbye to him. The show is not welcoming men to the domestic sphere — or acknowledging that we are already there in significant numbers — it is demonstrating that, for men, our kids and our homes are alien and dangerous territory.

If the women are sent on spa vacations, the men go on a kind of Domestic Wilderness Safari, into the dark heart of their own homes, suddenly sentenced to intense involvement with — *gasp!* — their own children.

Look, look, he's about to dress his son!

And he didn't even use the tranquilizer dart?

That mad, brave, fool!

"Meet Mr. Mom" stopped running in September — short summer series, cancelled, or on hiatus, it's hard to tell.

It wasn't a reality that I recognized, anyway.

And, frankly, I don't miss it. □

Donald N.S. Unger, Ph. D., is currently at work on a book: Men Can: The Changing Image and Reality of Fatherhood in America.

Comments? E-mail editorial@worcestermag.com.