

“The Meaning of ‘the Father’”
April 29, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

This is a new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love that bind us together, giving
dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

With deep gratitude for all who have kept burning the flame
Which lights our path, we kindle our chalice.
We remember thus in love the long pilgrimage of those living and dead
Who have in faith and hope guided our way.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: I do not believe we can put into anyone ideas which are not in him or her already.

CONGREGATION: As a rule, there are in everyone all sorts of good ideas, ready like tinder to catch fire.

MINISTER: But much of this tinder catches fire, or catches it successfully, only when it meets some flame or spark from outside, that is, from some other person.

CONGREGATION: Often, too, our own light goes out, and is rekindled into flame again by some experience we go through with a fellow human.

MINISTER: Thus, each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flames within us.

CONGREGATION: If we had before us now, those who have thus been a blessing to us, and could tell them how it came about,

MINISTER: They would be amazed to learn what had passed over from their lives into ours.

CONGREGATION: So, too, none of us knows what effect our life produces, or what we give to others.

MINISTER: That is hidden from us, and must remain so, though we are sometimes allowed to see some little fraction of it so that we may not lose courage.

CONGREGATION: The way in which power works is a mystery.

(Albert Schweitzer, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth)

A Time for All Ages

We all have persons who love us and care for us. They will be different persons for each of us.

One of the persons who cared for me was my father. I've been thinking about him recently, because just two months ago he died after a long and good life.

So this morning I want to tell you two little stories about how I know my father cared for me. Both of the stories have to do with occasions on which my family was having a picnic at a lake.

One time was when my family and other relatives were having a 4th of July at Cranberry Lake in Deception Pass State Park, which on Whidbey Island near the Naval Air Station.

While I was swimming in the water near the shore of Cranberry Lake, there was a commotion out on the end of the dock. Then, all of a sudden, my father ran past me toward the end of the dock – I have never seen him run so fast.

Something tragic had happened. A young sailor from the nearby Naval Air Station had dived into the water, but didn't come up. Rescue crews hurried to the scene and found him lying at the bottom of the water. But it was too late; he could not be revived.

I learned later that the reason my father was running so fast is that he thought it might have been one of his children or one of my cousins who was in trouble. That's why he was running so fast.

The other story takes place at the Silver Lake State Park, a lovely lake on the way toward Mt. Baker, east of Bellingham. This time it was just our family out fishing and having a picnic.

After fishing for awhile, we pulled our little motorboat ashore to eat our lunch and relax. Then my father warned me and my brother not to go out in the water because there was about a sharp drop-off in the lake just a few feet from shore. In other words, the water was shallow for a certain distance, then suddenly there was a drop-off and it got very deep.

But my brother, who was only five or six years old at the time, thought he had to test this idea, I guess, and so soon after we were there, waded out in the water. Sure enough, my father was right, indeed, there was drop-off, and my brother disappeared under the water, and couldn't swim.

I didn't actually see this happen, but what I did see happen was, again, my father running past me very fast. He ran through the shallow water, then took a great dive forward going into the deep water and came up carrying my brother. Then he rushed to shore, believing he might have to resuscitate my brother. But, fortunately, he had gotten to him in time so that he not swallowed water, and didn't need resuscitation.

Now, as I say, all of us probably have persons who care for us. It may be our fathers or our mothers or grandparents. But these are two times that I remember my father's care and concern for me and our family.

Introduction to Reading

This week I took the time to read a book I've carried with me for a number of years, but hadn't thoroughly read. It's titled, The Father: Mythology and Changing Roles, written by a married couple, Arthur and Libby Colman. In it, they speak of five different "fundamental images" of fathers that are found in the myths and legends, art and literature of humanity.

The names they give to these five fundamental images are: Father the Creator, Sky Father, Earth Father, Royal Father, and Dyadic Father. I will be describing these five fundamental images in my sermon.

The most common father image is what they name the "sky father." My reading is from their chapter on this image:

Reading

Images of the sky father have dominated world thought and social structure almost as long as we have recorded the history of our species. The power of the image has been so complete and long-lasting in all fields of human endeavor that, with only a few exceptions, the characteristics of the sky father and those of masculinity have been one and the same. The earth father represents an alternative mode of male function, but it has been buried in our collective unconscious.

Because men have been focusing so completely in the sky realm, the earth functions have become the province of the female, of the earth mother. Our parental archetype is generally a pair. The couple, sky father and earth mother, has impressed itself on our art traditions, our mythology, our religions, our community organization, and, of course, our family structure. We assume the correctness of a strong male leader accompanied by a devoted "girl Friday," a father helped by a mother.

Even though the image of sky father is so pervasive, we must attempt to define its characteristics. The Lord's Prayer portrays Him in its opening words: "Our Father, who art in Heaven." He is God and dwells in the sky. He is separated from the earth and therefore divorced from the intimate nurturant and fruitful functions. When He intervenes in earthly matters, it is from an aloof position. The prayer goes on to list the sky father's functions: (1) "Give us this day our daily bread," (2) "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," and (3) "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." These are His attributes: (1) to provide, (2) to judge, and (3) to protect.

(The Father: Mythology and Changing Roles, pp. 32-34)

"THE MEANING OF 'THE FATHER'"

Introduction

The occasion for my message this morning on the meaning of "the Father" is two-fold: first, the absence of many women and mothers of our congregation who are on their annual weekend retreat by Lake Crescent; and, secondly and more importantly, the recent and unexpected death of my own father in early February of this year, which has stirred many thoughts in me since that time.

For example, as I was preparing the soil in my garden this past week, my father was much in my mind, for gardening was always a part of his life. Not only did his garden supply much of the food for our family throughout the years, but for many years right up to the present, he would enter about forty or more different fruits and vegetables into the Northwest Washington County Fair in Lynden, Washington, where he lived. In the days and weeks prior to the Fair, there were many items in his garden that were off-limits, since they were potential prize-winners. You could only pick the ones with blemishes; the unblemished ones had to be saved for possible entry into the Fair.

Most of what I know about gardening, which is not that much, was picked up by osmosis from watching and helping my father when I was a youngster – helping him to prepare the soil and then plant, weed, water, and fertilize his garden; or, when older, from seeking his advice on gardening.

My last memories of him include a conversation that took place in my garden here in Port Townsend just two days before his sudden death by heart attack at the age of 87. My father and mother had come for a visit to our home, and he and I were outside looking over my garden, when he spoke some of his last words: "Now, if you run out of bean seeds, you know I have plenty extra." (He used to save seeds from the previous year's harvest.)

So I feel myself very fortunate to have had a wonderful father for a very long time. This was a father-son bond different *in kind* than any other relationship with any other person. Just as a teacher may always in some ways remain a teacher to you even if you later form a friendship, even more so a parent may always remain a parent for you.

Thus, my father was never just another individual to me. He was always father, “dad.” I never called him by his first name; I wouldn’t want to do that, for it was our *relationship* of father and son that was most important.

As a father, he embodied and represented for me a reality that went beyond his own person, beyond his own character and personality. He took on the role of “the Father” and played that role very well, thereby activating in me (and my brother and sister) larger connections with life.

To children, parents are larger than life. They are like deities. Indeed, our deities are in many ways modeled after our relationships with our parents.

And so through him not only was I given life, and not only was I protected and assisted in developing life, but through him I was connected to a larger life – to its potentials, to its possibilities.

And, beyond that, it isn’t just a memory of a *past* father-son relationship that I have valued, but to a real degree he continued to be in the specific role of “the Father.”

Because he was still healthy and vital in older age, even now in my sixtieth year, I could still seek out his advice on certain subjects. And I still knew that he was always there for me – always interested and watching and caring and hoping for the best for me.

If I may indulge a story that speaks of the kind of father he was for me: He was one who had the capacity to encourage without pushing his own agenda, the quality of approving your life without demanding that it be what exactly what he might think it could or should be.

For example, my father was very athletic. As a youngster, I used to love to attend the softball games he played ... until at about the age of 35 he abruptly quit, to my disappointment.

At his funeral two months ago, a couple of the men who used to play ball with him came up to me afterwards and said, “A number of us were just talking and we agreed among ourselves that if anyone in our area might have had a chance to play professionally, it would have been your father. He had a rifle for an arm, when he ran the bases it was as if his feet were hardly touching the ground, and he could hit like no one else.”

And so it was that my father also encouraged me in athletics: coached the Little League teams my brother and I played on for several years, and in high school always came to the games I played.

And I inherited not only my father’s interest in athletics, particularly baseball, but also my father’s throwing arm. Eventually I played college baseball and then semi-pro baseball. And there was a possibility I might have made an attempt to play

professionally. I doubt I could have gotten very far, because I didn't inherit my father's size and was smaller than most professional pitchers, but by this time I had already decided to go into the ministry, which had been in my mind all along anyway.

But the thing I wanted to say was that through all of this my father never ventured an opinion as to what direction my life should take. Only years later – I believe I was in my mid-forties – did my father once say, “You know, I always wondered why you never gave it a shot” – meaning, “I wonder why you never tried to play professionally.”

But at the time he never said, “You know, I think you ought to give it try.” He wouldn't intrude his opinion into how I should live my life, which I think is quite remarkable given his own interest and aptitude in athletics.

So in the last weeks and months I've been thinking about my father and what it means to be “a father.”

And what I'd like to bring to you this morning are five different images of “the Father” as they are delineated in the book that I read from earlier. (My sermon has gone in quite a different direction from where I started earlier in the week.)

Father the Creator

The first “fundamental image” of the Father named by the authors is that of “creator.” And simply that: the male who unites with the female to create newborn human life, but who is not involved, or very little involved, beyond that with actual fathering. Say the authors, His [The male parent's] role as father is assured even if he fails in all his family roles. To create is be a father.” (p. 9)

In mythology, the first and ultimate act of creation is often ascribed to the male, as in the Hebrew scripture, where a male deity is the father of the world.

The male is considered the point of origin, the prime mover, the first spark of life, of consciousness, of thought. It is he who brings order to chaos and impregnates the earth so it can bear fruit. (p. 9)

And for some males, this is about as far as the role of the father goes. As the authors put it, there are “...men who become fathers only to find that it limits rather than expands the individual, creative parts of themselves.” (p. 12)

Thus, they feel hemmed in and are reluctant to participate further in family life. There is a conflict for them between the creativity of the home and family and the creativity and interests they find in the outer world.

Psychoanalyst Karen Horney turns around Freud's idea of girls having “penis envy” and suggests that civilization itself is a product of “womb envy” on the part of boys. Little boys would have preferred to be able to do what women can do, she says, but when they

learn they cannot, they have to be content with creativity and power in other realms. (p.18) Thus, many men see the external world as their arena for creativity, (p. 19) and leave the creativity of the home and family to women.

In this regard, I think of a popular book by Richard Bach written in the early 1970's titled, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, which had to do with exploring your own creative potential. The shine from that book was diminished for me when I discovered that the author had left his wife and three children to go on his creative adventure.

Nevertheless, say the authors:

We feel that becoming a father can be life-changing all by itself, even ... if the overt parenting responsibility is denied. It is the biological act which sets in motion the forces that will in time alter consciousness, self-perception, and even attitude toward the outside world. The importance of the biological "blood" tie in the father's experience is as uncanny as it is powerful. (p. 13)

And I think here of men who are asked to be sperm donors by women who wish to have children – women who do not wish to have the genetic father do the fathering but simply to be, as it were, the spark of creation. This is something that such men have to consider. It is not a simple thing when a man knows that he will be involved in the creation of a child, even if he is not involved in the parenting of that child.

Sky Father

Now I turn to images of the father where the fathers *are* involved with their children and the family, beginning with the most prevalent image of the father in our culture designated by the authors as the "sky father," that is, the one who is outside, above, and coming from beyond – like a Zeus, a Thor, or a Jehovah.

This is the image of the protector and provider; the bread-winner; the limit-setter; the one who interfaces with the outside world and is a bridge between the inside home world and the outside world of community; the one who challenges his offspring, particularly his male offspring, to achievement; pushes performance, encourages independence, strength, and the ability to withstand the harsh realities of existence; the one who provides guidance; the one who is interested in justice more than mercy.

As the authors say, "The abstract nature of a sky father's relationship does not mean that his involvement is not intense." (p. 34) It's just not involved so much in the everyday detail and nurturance. His involvement tends to point to the future of the children. (p. 38) He is the one who provides the model for the children to leave the nest and find their individuality. (p. 39) He provides the model for separation from the family.

The sky father is not necessarily an unpopular figure in the family, even though sometimes resented for his absences and aloofness. But, as the authors say:

He can be the benevolent one who comes home with his pockets full of candy, who leads the family on exciting outings on weekends, who has wondrous knowledge of the world outside. He is a romantic figure, friendly but unattainable. (p. 38)

However, the authors suggest that:

Sky fathers in modern society are in trouble.... In modern times, it is hard for the father to create a romantic aura for his younger children. [And] His adolescent children are uncertain about what he represents and what he can provide. Technological advances are so rapid that the father is often unequipped to deal with the world into which his children must move. They will not join; they will leave him behind. The peer group may become the guide and support in the outside while the 'old man' is discarded as useless. (p. 44)

Nevertheless, say the authors, the sky father is still the dominant image of what it means to be a father in our culture. Part of the reason for this is that other images for being a father are not available. But they do exist, and now I turn to them, beginning with what the authors call the "earth father."

Earth Father

The earth father, as you might expect, is the father who develops his nurturant qualities, the qualities that are typically those of the "earth mother," the woman who thrives in the center of the family and in its daily care and nurture.

Say the authors, the earth father, though mostly unfamiliar in our culture, is an ancient image, one found in the legends, myths, and stories throughout history, and providing a counterpart to the more familiar sky father images.

Instead of being aloof and omnipotent, the earth father lives in the dark, rich depths of the land. He ... is connected with the ongoing rebirth of the seasons, with the inevitable cycles of death and birth, and with fertility in plants, animals, and humans. There are many earthy male figures who are protectors of the forest, gods of the woods, streams, and fields. (p. 21)

In some cases, the father is identified with the earth itself, the very stuff from which life has come.

In terms of the earth father's role in a family, he is not just the assistant to the mother; but, rather, he is directly engaged with the children. His relationship is not mediated by the mother. Say the authors:

The earth father is a man who interacts with his family on a day-to-day basis.... the family (not the community or the work world) must be the man's primary focus. Even when he is away from home, his consciousness will be with his child. At home his activities will be nurturant, focused on the intimate parenting behaviors which

sustain relationships with the family. If he is involved outside, it is more to help the family than as an end in itself. (p. 29)

The authors indicate that to take on this role of being an earth father in our culture requires a great deal of mental adjustment, for “Of all the images of parenting, that of earth father is farthest removed from the values and ambitions instilled in growing boys in America.” (p. 31)

The authors also indicate that it “may be the hardest image for a man to feel truly enriched by...” (p. 31), for the sky father is often seen by the family as a “kind of family celebrity, a special person, almost a hero to his children.” (p. 31) Their intense moments with the children often seem more important than the “mother’s hours of devoted care.” (p. 31) An earth father loses this privileged position, for “The earth parent is there every day, taken for granted, unexotic. He is ‘just around.’” (p. 31)

One of the ironies of the many divorces that we have in our society is that many fathers are being compelled, as it were, to become earth fathers.

Royal father

A fourth image of the father is what the authors designate as the “royal father.”

This is the father, as described by the authors, who:

... wants to take on the functions of both earth and sky. He wants to be the total parenting system and take care of both the inner and outer needs of the family. Royal fathers may need to delegate some of the care-taking responsibilities to others, but their helpers are in no way equals. Even if they are married, royal fathers do not treat their wives as true partners in parenting. (p. 48)

In mythology, this is the image of fathers descended from mythic heroes. “The father cannot be overruled, even by God, for he is God, the most powerful authority recognized by his people.” (p. 48) Say the authors:

... the royal father is a total entity containing all functions, including those traditionally relegated to the female. The royal father does not seek to mate with an earth goddess who has her own strong female power. Instead, he takes a virgin for his bride. She is valued for being pure and innocent. She has little political education or personal power. She performs all her tasks under his watchful eye. The royal father protects her along with the rest of the family and the kingdom. The protecting stance robs her of much of her female potency and influence. It also eliminates any competition for power in the home. (pp. 49-50)

What is being described here is the traditional patriarchy in which the mother has no real authority over the children.

The best cultural example of this, say the authors, is traditional Chinese society, which has lasted for more than 3000 years, and also Western European fathers, particularly of the 19th century. My grandfather on my mother's side was this type of "royal father."

Such a patriarchal approach is now out of favor. However, say the authors, with the increasing number of single parents, at present there are many royal parents – indeed, more women than men.

Single parents often become royal parents. Because there is not a spouse, they must take on the full parental responsibility for earth and sky roles....

Under current social conditions, there are more royal mothers than royal fathers, largely because single parents are far more likely to be women than men. It is also true that mothers who work outside the home are more likely to continue to nurture their children than fathers who work outside the home. Perhaps women who become royal parents partake more of the earth mother image. They value their ability to be loving as much as their ability to be controlling and instructional." (pp. 56-57)

Add the authors:

The inner experience of the single father [and this also applies to the single mother] is often very positive. As a royal father he can draw from the transcendental potency of the archaic world parent, first creator and total power in the universe.... The royal parent does not have to compete or bargain. He (or she) is free from the power struggles, squabbles, and outbursts inevitable in working with a partner. He does not have to worry about the other parent's undercutting his word or stealing the love that he feels is rightfully his. The royal father is powerful and important in his family; he may carry this sense of meaning deep inside himself even when he is overwhelmed with the double burdens of work and household. (p. 57)

Indeed, say the authors:

The role of royal parent is incredibly demanding, not only of physical energy, but of psychic energy as well. The single parent (or paired parent who relegates his partner to dependency) must take on all the complex practical tasks of parenthood, as well as fulfill all the emotional needs and receive all the projections of the children. It seems more than any one person can do – and yet it is being done all the time. (p. 58)

Dyadic Father

The fifth and final image of the father to be mentioned is what the authors name the "dyadic father" – "dyad" defined as a "group of two."

In the natural sciences, *dyad* indicates a pair in which the whole is functionally more complex than the sum of its two parts;... In the behavior sciences, a dyad is a two

person relationship which forms a new social entity that has different properties than either person contributes individually. (p. 59)

So the dyadic father, like the royal father, combines both the sky father and the earth father functions, but does so with a partner. This could be a partner of the opposite sex, or a partner of the same sex.

In the case of the authors, who are a husband and wife team, this is the model with which they are trying to work, and the one they think best fits the direction in which our society is and ought to be moving.

“Dyadic parenting,” they say, “ signifies the sharing of earth and sky roles by both partners.” (p. 60) The parents function interchangeably. They are “not necessarily merged, but linked, of equal strength, and working together.” (p. 61)

They may represent the “opposites” of male and female, but they share the larger similarity of *parents*. They may be differentiated into earth and sky, permissive and strict, serious and fun, intellectual and emotional, or any other polarities that happen to distinguish the personalities of the two partners, but one is not ‘more parent’ than the other. Both experience their primary importance to the family and carry their family roles as primary in their own sense of themselves. Their actual behavior may shift as individual and family needs shift. Some partners are almost indistinguishable from each other in their parenting styles. Others are more clearly different. The important practical qualities of their partnership are flexibility in shifting roles, cooperation with each other, and most of all, a shared recognition of parenting as an equally potent image in both their lives.” (p. 62)

One of the requisites for a dyadic father is the desire to be complete in himself as well as a full partner in a family unit. A dyadic father must also be a royal father capable of responding to both his earth father and sky father images. The dyadic father must be comfortable as both nurturer and provider, yet his task will go beyond this personal, inner synthesis. He must also accept a full relationship with his partner.” (p. 63)

The authors discuss some of their own experiences in following the dyadic parenting model. A couple of things struck me in this respect:

At one point in their lives, the father, Arthur Colman, a physician, was spending more time away from home, and then, later, his spouse, Libby Colman, was spending more time away. At that point they said the children sometimes would refer to him as “mom” and her as “dad.”

And one other example: In a dyadic parenting model, the children will perceive both parents as primary caretakers. Thus, when a six-year old daughter raised in such an environment was asked if her father “babysat” for her mother when she taught night

classes, the child looked at the questioner in amazement and exclaimed, “How can he *babysit*? He’s our *Daddy!*” (p. 192)

So these are five fundamental images of fathers, as delineated by authors Arthur and Libby Colman.

Three quick comments on these fundamental images

There are three quick points to be made with respect to these images:

First, it’s helpful to have such images or visions of what a father is or can be. Such images give a reference point, models to work with and to measure yourself against. You have a vision of what father roles have existed in the past and what potentials exist in you. You’re not creating the thing all by yourself. You’re less lonely. You’re part of something larger. You pour yourself into a role.

Secondly, these fundamental images or roles are characterizations and abstractions. One is not all in one role or another, or connected just to one image or another. As the authors say:

The archetypal images of father that we have described... are abstractions of many possible fathering roles that a man can take in a family. They do not define rigid categories that limit what is possible for an individual. Rather, they are larger-than-life manifestations of the potential within every father and images of him that might be perceived by every son and daughter. (p. 75)

When I was finished reading about these different roles, and in thinking about my role as a father, I assigned a percentage to each of the images. I was a certain percentage Father Creator, another percentage the Sky Father, another percentage the Earth Father, yet another percentage the Royal Father, and finally another percentage Dyadic Father – and I won’t tell what percentages I came up with.

And, thirdly, even though the authors are working with images of the father, they recognize that it is primarily parental roles they are dealing with, and that most of these roles could apply with very little difference to women and to mothers as well.

For each of these archetypes, we are looking specifically at the masculine image, but we realize that they can also be applied (with few alterations) to mothers as well, for the division between earth and sky can transcend the division between masculine and feminine. We have chosen to explore the parental archetypes through the images for men because fathers have so seldom realized that they could devote creative personal energy to working out a meaningful role in the family. (p. 7)

Conclusion

And let me conclude, then, with a poem that I came across just last week from Garrison Keillor's Daily Almanac. It's a poem related to the theme of being a father, a poem that suggests to me the most essential quality of being a father, of being a parent, the quality I mentioned earlier with respect to my own father, namely, that of always being there for you and of wanting to see you thrive.

The poem is written by Brenda Shaw and addressed to her father, but titled "Parent" – I think you will see why. Her father didn't have to be good with words, didn't have to be personally self-revealing, just had to be loyal, had to care, had to want his child's best interest.

Father, I know more about Mother
than I do about you,
and she died when I was a baby.
I lived with you for eighteen years.

In all that time you seldom spoke.
Your favorite words were "Oh my gosh!"
said in three different tones
for three different sorts of occasion:

In surprise
at an unexpected pleasant happening.

In anxiety if I were proposing
some crazy stunt and you were worried.

In despair if the worst
that could possibly happen had happened.

I wonder—is that what you said
when Mother died without warning,
without saying goodbye?

Somewhere along the way
I asked you questions—very few.
One was, "What was Mother like?"
but you couldn't find the words.

Another was "Which of your two wives
did you like the best?"
You said "The one who gave me you,"
and choked up.

Later I asked
"Do you believe in God?"

You said "No, I guess I don't."
On that, at least, we agreed.

We knew each other on a level
beyond words.
There were no divided loyalties.
I knew you'd stand behind me or beside me
whatever happened.

There was one question I never had to ask.
The one sure thing in a nightmare world
was the knowledge that you loved me.

("Parent," Brenda Shaw, from Poems of Maine in the Nineteen Thirties and Forties: by one who lived through them. Moon Pie Press)

Benediction

May the love that gives to life its beauty,
the reverence that gives to life its sacredness,
and the purposes that give to life its deep significance
be strong within each of us
and lead us into ever deepening relationships with all of life.

(George G. Brooks)

Extinguishing of Chalice

And now we extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 29, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)