

“A Celebration of Fatherhood”
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Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Guest Speaker: Dick Conway

Since today is Father’s Day, I will of course be speaking largely about fathers, but I’m really talking all the time about parenthood, so I hope I won’t seem to be ignoring mothers. After all, it is our day—and we fathers have to make the most of it.

We know very well that, except for today, we play second fiddle in the national consciousness. In the stores Mother’s Day cards vastly outnumber Father’s Day cards. And the national mantra is “apple pie, baseball, and Mom”—not Dad. Even in the verbs, we come off poorly; “fathering” has such a limited connotation compared to “mothering.” To *father* a child is simply to be partly responsible for its conception. But to *mother* a child is to nurture it, to give it tender, loving care. If a father were to treat a child in such a way, we might say he was “mothering” it. And of course you can even mother a father—many women have!

About the only place we have an edge on mothers is in the looks department. Children are often said to resemble their fathers. Even daughters are sometimes seen to take after Dad. My own daughter has sometimes been told that she looks like me. She doesn’t much like it, but there you are. Sons sometimes resemble their fathers so much that they are said to be “a chip off the old block,” and some go through life known as “Chip.” And it’s the father who is credited when we say—in my favorite meaningless metaphor—he’s “the spitting image” of his parent. Surely once the phrase was “the very spit and image” but we’ve run the words together so long that we don’t even listen to what we are saying. Last week I was in a restaurant that was proclaimed in the menu to have been designed to be the spitting image of a famous baseball stadium!

Fathers don’t fare very well in mythology either. The ancient Greeks told the story of Uranus, the first father, who devoured his children so they wouldn’t wrest the throne from him—which of course the first surviving son, Chronos, did, slaying Uranus and cutting off his genitals for good measure. I’m sure Freud, who saw universal meaning in the Greek myths, must have made something out of that. (Chronos threw the bloody genitals into the ocean, which somehow gave rise to Aphrodite—and I suppose Freud made something out of that too.) Naturally Zeus, the son of Chronos, also slew his old man; it was not a good time for inventing the first Father’s Day.

While the Greeks were struggling with hostile family dynamics, the Hebrews were portraying their god in nearly as savage a fashion. Yahweh demanded absolute loyalty (something Zeus never dreamed of) and as a father figure he was punitive rather than paternal. Not only was he bloodthirsty towards the enemies of the Hebrews (even stopping the sun so Joshua could slay more Amorites), he was downright cruel to Abraham and Isaac, demanding—in a test!—that father sacrifice son to him.

This sort of son-father conflict in the Hebrew myth is not far from that portrayed in Greek myths, such as the Oedipus story that fascinated Sigmund Freud. Freud, born in 1856, was a child of the nineteenth century, and it must always be remembered that all his life he saw things through a Victorian filter (just as you and I have been conditioned to look through the lens of the twentieth century). In the Oedipus myth—wherein Oedipus is doomed to kill his father and marry his mother—which the Greeks enacted yearly at their great festivals, Freud saw a universal conflict that still dwelt in the unconscious urges of the families around him.

In other ways, however, those families were different from the families of previous centuries. Whereas most families of the past had been forced to adapt to agrarian conditions—in which everyone had to work very hard just to survive—owing to the various impacts of the industrial revolution, the Victorian family had leisure time and few traditional roles for its often large numbers of children. Parents and children on a farm had to work as a team, and the chores were essential, inescapable, and meaningful. What, by contrast, would be the role of the father in this new urban setting?

One famous role—though by no means the only one—was the *paterfamilias*, the stern, removed, Jehovah-like father who dispensed justice and punishment without love. Samuel Butler, who portrayed the families he had known first-hand in his novel *The Way of All Flesh*, said that the first rule of the domineering parent was “to break the will” of the child. In that way children would be rendered docile and receptive to the lessons they would need to learn growing up. “Spare the rod and spoil the child”—itself a Biblical injunction—and “children should be seen and not heard” were the slogans of such parenting. King George V, himself a Victorian, born in 1865, said, “I was afraid of my father and he was afraid of his father. And I’m going to be damned sure my children are afraid of me.”

“To break the will of the child”—such a concept is anathema to us. We believe instead that children should be first of all nourished, to be encouraged to develop their talents and self-expression to the fullest so that they may grow up to be confident and self-possessed adults. And that concept would, I believe, be so foreign as to be dumbfounding to the average Victorian.

What happened? How did two cultures so closely related become so different? I believe, as C.P. Snow, the British novelist and scientist has argued, that somewhere after the First World War a belief took hold of Western consciousness, a belief now so strong that we regard it as a self-evident truth. We believe that children have a special right to happiness—and that their early years ought to be a golden age of innocence and loving family adventure.

Out of that belief has come a rich lode of our own mythology, in both memoir and fiction. I’m thinking of classics such as *Life with Father*, *Mama’s Bank Account*, and *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and the current recollection of the Fifties by Bill Bryson, *The Life & Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*. On the radio in the ‘40s were a number of idyllic family dramas set in small-town America, such as “Vic & Sade”; on TV was the iconic “Father

Knows Best” (which my mother wryly called, “Mother Knows Worst”), featuring Jim Anderson, the impossibly perfect father who always treated his children with love and wisdom.

Perhaps once we would all have liked to be a father like Jim Anderson or to have had a father like him. But not only was that an impossible ideal even years ago, today’s societal changes make such a role a bit smugly unsavory. Indeed, we have no role for a father that our diverse society would agree on. My wife reminds me that the Women’s Movement is largely responsible for the abundant choices today’s fathers have. As women insisted on egalitarian treatment in the family as well as in the workplace, men were liberated to become the fathers they were cut out to be. Now they could share parenting with their spouses. Today we have stay-at-home dads as well as stay-at-home moms. Men can even show their feminine sides and mother their children!

I guess I’m talking about the Dyadic role of the father, as mentioned by Bruce Bode in an April sermon. When Bruce listed the five different father roles—Creator, Sky, Earth, Royal—I had trouble finding my own persona with my children. It’s true that my children often thought of me as a royal pain, but I think I need another category, maybe “Big Brother,” for I often played games with and on my children. And they continue to do so to me today! A friend once observed that most of us become parents before we are through being children. He also said that he was a different father with each of his offspring.

As I thought about what roles I could and should have played—and how I wished my children would remember me—I thought of this description of his father that E. E. Cummings once wrote to a friend:

My father was a New Hampshire man, 6 foot 2,
A crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & a firstrate
sailor . . . & a woodsman who could find his way
through forests primeval without a compass & a
canoeist who’d stillpaddle you up to a deer without
ruffling the surface of a pond & an ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he
gave up hunting) an expert
photographer (the best I’ve ever seen) & an actor who
portrayed Julius Caesar . . . & a painter (both in oils
and watercolours) & a better carpenter than any
professional & an architect who designed his own
houses before building them & (when he liked) a plumber who just for the
fun of it installed all his own water-
works & (while at Harvard) a teacher with small use
for professors—by whom . . . we were literally surrounded (but not
defeated)—& later (at Doctor Hale’s . . .
Unitarian Church) a preacher who . . . one beautiful
Sunday in spring remarked from the pulpit that he
couldn’t understand why anyone had come to hear him

on such a day & my father was a servant of the people
who fought Boston's biggest and crookedest politician
fiercely all day & a few evenings later sat down with him
cheerfully at the Rotary Club & my father's voice was so
magnificent that he was called on to impersonate God
speaking from Beacon Hill (he was heard all over the
common) & my father gave me Plato's metaphor of the
cave with my mother's milk.

Wow. What an incredible list! I wouldn't want to have such an ideal father to live up to, and I doubt that Edward Cummings would have either. In fact, he would probably have been surprised by his son's admiration since they often quarreled when E. E. was younger. But Cummings wrote this appreciation of his father much later (it appears in his non-lecture of 1962) in his life. Perhaps the elder Cummings would have wanted most what another poet, Robert Hayden, gave his father, compassionate understanding. In "Those Winter Sundays," Hayden wrote:

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking,
when the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
Of love's austere and lonely offices?

Memories of our fathers are really an inquiry into our own identities. Sometimes we find our father's face in the mirror. "Men at forty," wrote Donald Justice:

Learn to close softly
The doors to rooms they will not be
Coming back to.

At rest on a stair landing,
They feel it moving
Beneath them now like the deck of a ship,
Though the swell is gentle.

And deep in mirrors
They rediscover
The face of the boy as he practices tying
His father's tie there in secret.

And the face of that father,
Still warm with the mystery of lather,
They are more fathers than sons themselves now.
Something is filling them, something

That is like the twilight sound
Of the crickets, immense,
Filling the woods at the foot of the slope
Behind their mortgaged houses.

E. B. White found a similar confusion when he took his young son to a Maine lake that he has last visited with his own father forty years before. "When I got back there," he wrote,

With my boy, and we settled into a camp near a farmhouse and into the kind of summertime I had known, I could tell that it was going to be pretty much the same as it had been before—I knew it, lying in bed the first morning, smelling the bedroom, and hearing the boy sneak quietly out and go off along the shore in a boat. I began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father. This sensation persisted, kept cropping up all the time we were there. It was not an entirely new feeling, but in this setting it grew much stronger. I seemed to be living a dual existence. I would be in the middle of some simple act, I would be picking up a bait box or laying down a table fork, or I would be saying something, and suddenly it would be not I but my father who was saying the words or making the gesture. . . .

We went fishing the first morning. I felt the same damp moss covering the worms in the bait can, and saw the dragonfly alight on the tip of my rod as it hovered a few inches from the surface of the water. It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and there had been no years. . . . I looked at the boy, who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held his rod, my eyes watching.

It seems to me on this Father's Day that our memories of our parents—our fathers—are the vaults wherein our personal stories are kept, those narratives that we tell ourselves about how we became who we are. Brian Doyle, a Portland writer, says they are the memories in our hearts. In a recent *American Scholar* essay he writes:

So much held in a heart in a lifetime. So much held in a heart in a day, an hour, a moment. We are utterly open with no one, in the end—not mother and father, not wife or husband, not lover, not child, not friend. We open windows to each other but we live alone in the house of the heart. Perhaps we must. Perhaps we could not bear to be so naked, for fear of a constantly harrowed heart. When young we think there will come one person who will savor and sustain us always; when we are older we know this is the dream of a child, that all hearts finally are bruised and scarred, scored and torn, repaired by time and will, patched by force of character, yet fragile and rickety forevermore, no matter how ferocious the defense and how many bricks you bring to the wall. You can brick up your heart as stout and tight and hard and cold and impregnable as you possibly can and down it comes in an instant, felled by a woman's second glance, a child's apple breath, the shatter of glass in the road, the words *I have something to tell you . . .*, the brush of your mother's papery ancient hand in the thicket of your hair, the memory of your father's voice early in the morning echoing from the kitchen where he is making pancakes for his children.

So on Father's Day, when we call old Dad—or our children call us—I suspect that what we are really doing is trying to add another chapter or verse to that personal story of our lives.

Maybe we'll get it right this time.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon delivered by Dick Conway, a member of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, on June 17, 2007. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)