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**REMEMBERING  
FATHERHOOD**

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Today is Father's Day, and on this day we remember our fathers. I also am a father—I have a nine-year-old daughter named Sophia—and so it is on this day that I feel most aware of belonging to a tradition larger than myself, a tradition passed down from generation to generation, from my grandfather to my father and, finally, to me.

*What is fatherhood?* On a day like today, it is easy to get sentimental about fatherhood and to end up sounding like a Hallmark card. To be honest, sometimes fatherhood is the place in my life where I feel, most clearly, my “growing edges.” It's funny. When I was Sophia's age, I felt I was bulletproof, ready to take on the world. Now, at 34, my hair is turning gray and my stomach is becoming finicky so I have to watch what I eat. Just when I want to be all knowledgeable and wise for Sophia, I realize how much a work in progress I really am.

Well, I suppose I can take heart from something Bill Cosby once said: “If the American father feels bewildered and even defeated, let him take comfort from the fact that whatever he does in any fathering situation has a fifty percent chance of being right.”

Here's a scene from several months ago. It is morning, and I am walking Sophia to school. We are late. I tend to get anxious when I am late, so I have already been needling her to hurry up, and this isn't helping at all. Halfway to school, I notice that

her running shoes are untied and the laces are turning brown in the muddy slush of Chicago's springtime. This irritates me. If I let her do this, is she going to grow up taking things for granted? So I tell her to tie her shoelaces, and my irritation comes through loud and clear. Fed up with all my poking and prodding, she stops walking, turns slowly to face me, stares me down in a way that is somehow strangely familiar, and says, finally, *no!*

I hasten to explain that it's unsafe for her shoelaces to be flopping all over the place—she might trip herself up. Besides, she needs to take care of her belongings and show more gratitude for what she has. Things only go downhill from here. Sophia is furious and stalks off, doesn't wait for me. She's ten feet ahead when something very odd happens. My identity splits. Part of me stands back from the whole scene and feels, in a word, *sheepish*. Why am I being so controlling? How absurd it all is! The other part of me, meanwhile, can't let it alone, can't walk away. Just like Mom or Dad used to say to me, I say to Sophia, "you just wait! Just wait 'till you have your own children, and then you'll see what it's like!"

*What is fatherhood?* Sometimes it is like a time warp in which the tracks of past and present blend and blur together. So as to achieve clarity and consciousness about what is happening, the different tracks need to be untangled and sorted. At the same time I am Sophia's Dad, I am also, like a psychic, channeling my own father. Then there is the question of who, exactly, was late, and who was taking things for granted. I raise this question in light of my anxiety around being late and my irritation at the thought of anyone taking things for granted.

The fact that my anxiety and irritation were so extreme and almost out of control suggests that, in some strange way, I was taking things personally; that, incredibly, I interpreted Sophia's behavior to indicate something about *me*, about who *I* am. Could it be that the real guilty party was *me*, that *I* was the one who was late and taking things for granted? Could it be that Sophia became, for me, a screen upon which I projected my own life and inner conflicts?

As odd as this conclusion sounds, my sense is that we project our lives upon our children's lives very often. When they do something wonderful, we are the ones puffing out our chests. When they do something shameful or embarrassing, we are the ones squirming and blushing. Ultimately, the issues here have to do with healthy boundaries and with taking responsibility. Because it is so easy for boundaries between parent and child to blur, messages about taking responsibility can end up being confusing and self-contradictory. I still think that Sophia should have taken better care of her running shoes, but I am proud of her that she said *no* to me. She

was saying *no* to all the psychological baggage that, in truth, was mine and belonged only to me.

*What is fatherhood?* It's a growing edge, a challenge to become more conscious and aware of myself in the privilege of bringing up Sophia. I also think that fatherhood is a place of passion, of joy and sorrow. My seminary, Meadville Lombard, is affiliated with the University of Chicago, and on Wednesdays the food court there sells milkshakes for one dollar. Sophia and I go every Wednesday—it's a bonding time for us. Usually we eat a bit of dinner first. Sophia likes Taco Bell, and every time she puts her order in, I watch her as she stands on her tiptoes to speak above the counter. I listen to the music of her songbird voice. I can't help but remember a time when she was more likely to wear her food than to eat it.

While we eat, we talk. I ask her, *What's going on? How's life?* She tells me about her friends, how so *and so* is hilarious and how *what's his name* is definitely an idiot and I do *not* like him. She shares the latest joke she's heard:

Knock knock,  
Who's there?  
Canoe.  
Canoe who?  
Canoe you help me with my homework?

We also talk about school, and I tell her about how seminary is going for me. She complains about her yucky music teacher, and I grip about my yucky hymnody professor.

There is so much I want to teach Sophia and to share with her! I taught her how to ride a bike, and on a sunny day we'll explore the University of Chicago neighborhood together. When I was still teaching philosophy at Blinn College, Sophia became interested in logic, and so I taught her how to create arguments called "categorical syllogisms," as in:

All cats are mammals  
All mammals are animals  
Therefore, all cats are animals

This was fun, and she did a pretty good job with something that even college-level students can have a difficult time with.

There are times, however, when it feels as if we live in different worlds, and there is nothing I can share. At such times, I feel the pure cold of space between us, which is a frozen silence. Once, we were arguing and I asked her to help me to understand where she was coming from. I will never forget what she said in response: "Dad, you will never understand me." Later, when things cooled down a bit, she told me that she didn't mean it, that it had to do with the fact that I wasn't a girl. I wasn't a girl, so I wouldn't be able to understand like Mom could. How could I disagree with this? Yet it did not take away my loneliness for her, my memory of standing there helpless, not knowing what to say, wishing more than anything else to be able to understand.

Silence also settles around the issue of work. As a philosopher and now an aspiring minister, I identify with the poet Rilke when he says,

Sometimes a man stands up during dinner  
And walks outdoors and keeps on walking,  
Because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

A vision of Truth, of God, of Life Abundant grasps me, and I go where I am sent. Yet how can I express my anguish about the time it takes away from being with my family? How would Sophia understand? I feel this so keenly because I was the son of a workaholic, a medical doctor whose patients simply adored him. Medical school taught him how to be a fine doctor, and the world honored him for it. But medical school did not teach him how to be a father, and the world made it difficult for him to juggle work with family

Lately a big topic of conversation between Sophia and me has been my father's recent death. We talk about death, what it means to live leaning into one's inescapable death. I talk as a philosopher and theologian, but I can go only so far before I hit a wall in myself, a wall of pure numbness, which is not about philosophy or theology but about my life. Long before I can get to that point, however, Sophia says, "Dad, you're getting too serious again!" I honor the boundary she draws, and I snap back from my sadness. There is only so much philosophizing and theologizing you can do with a nine-year-old! Yet I feel like I have been in my life an explorer of strange and new worlds and I yearn to share the sights with Sophia and also to share in what she sees.

Have you ever seen the pictures of medieval explorers, gone so far in their explorations that they have reached the edge of the flat earth, beyond which lies an otherworldly ether populated by strange beasts, angels and demons? With my

father's death, I feel like I have gone to this supernatural otherworld, this place beyond all places, and what I have found is that fatherhood, ultimately, is a place of suspicion and remembrance, anger and reverence.

I have said so many times, "I don't want to make the same mistakes that my parents made. I want to do better with Sophia than my own Mom and Dad did with me." And even now I cannot renounce these words. Fathers and mothers, even the best of them, with the best of intentions, hurt us and scar us. There is clear cause for suspicion and anger with the inner parent pops out and says, "You just wait! Just wait 'till you have your own children, and then you'll see what it's like!" and in this way passes along an ancient curse.

But as bad as the hurts and scars might be, still, my father—our fathers—have shaped and formed us, for good and for ill. They are part of a past that has made us into who we are, and we must not turn our backs upon it. It is a past for us to struggle with, to wrestle with until it blesses us. A wise person (Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza) once said, "The enslavement of a people becomes total when their history is destroyed and solidarity with the dead is made impossible."

I say this from experience. There have been times when I have tried to forget, to deny, to change my name so that my roots became untraceable. I was like a Stalinist propagandist, airbrushing the politically incorrect out of photographs. The end result was not liberation, not more freedom, but a feeling off living in limbo, of existing nowhere, of being a mere abstraction. It is fatherhood, ultimately, that has taught me to affirm my father and to love him even though at the same time I must struggle with his memory and wrestle a blessing out of him.

On this day, which is father's day, may we remember our fathers in suspicion and love, anger and reverence. If we are fathers ourselves, may we accept and know our growing edges, may we embrace the passion of fatherhood and to it, ever say yes.

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*The **Unitarian Universalist Men's Network** supports a mature, liberal religious masculinity with resources and leadership. P.O. Box 3070, Madison, WI 53704-0070.  
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