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Fathers, Sons, and Daughters: Love and Truth

When I was twelve-years-old I told my mother that I did not think my father loved me. It was one of those moments when you cry for help as a child—where you have something moving internally—a very unconscious longing for connection. My mother answered the only way she could, with reassurance that my father loved me, and then she did something she thought would help the situation, she told my father.

At dinner one night I was not allowed to leave the table after I finished, an unusual happening, one that signaled that I was going to be told something important. I sat very quietly, feeling smaller with each passing moment. The uncertainty and silence were dreadful. I tried to assume a posture of complete innocence: I sat up straight, kept my hands folded in front of me, and I respectfully lowered my eyes. My father moved his chair away from the table and my mother brought him his after dinner coffee, but instead of returning to the table with her own coffee, she lingered at the kitchen counter. My memory of sitting at the table made its way into a poem I wrote several years ago:

My father looked at me with heavy, searching eyes.
Impatient, and indignant, questioning,
like the first time Marie Curie saw the chalk appearance
of her own bones on black clouded film.

My arms rested on the brown Formica table,
the distance between us was thick with his vibrating challenge,
“Your mother tells me you don’t think I love you.”

A weakly formed, “yes”
came out of my mouth with a cough.
I wanted to push away from the fake grain of the Formica.

“It’s not true,” he said.

He lit a cigarette,
dropped the uranium weight of his gaze,
and released a deep sigh,
both of us too embarrassed to continue.

That was it. In my father's mind, there was no need to question the matter any further.

There were other interesting aspects of my father's love.

When I played several good baseball games, or basketball games, he would start coming to the games. As soon as I had a bad game, he would stop. By the time I got to high school, he stopped all together.

I went off to college in 1971. We had some father-son conflicts common to that time and I developed a very cynical attitude toward him. There were so many things about him that I did not like: he drank too much, he had several embarrassing prejudices, he voted for Nixon, I voted for McGovern.

When I was 19, just after the 1972 election, I went to a Christmas party at the house of Father Wolfe, the minister of the Episcopal Church I attended growing up. After a year plus of college I was just starting to get a feel for the meaning of life. I'm reminded of an advertisement for a San Francisco talk-radio host on the side of the MUNI buses: "What a year and a half of junior college gets you." Jack Horton, the deacon of the church came up to me in the kitchen while we were putting away some dishes and asked me with a very reverent attitude that commanded my attention. "What does it mean to you when someone says to you, 'I love you.'" and "What does it mean to you when I say to you that God loves you?" I can still feel the impact of those questions.

Unfortunately, my inner awakening did not help my relationship with my father. Eighteen months later my brother and father stood in the parking lot of the business they owned together, and talked about the letter I sent telling them I was getting married. Two hours later my father died in an accident at work.

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My first understanding of unconditional love, as an adult, came with the birth of my first daughter, Robin. All I had to do was look at her and for the first time I could understand something about the interior life of my mother and father. The birth of my second and third

daughters Holly and Nellie deepened my understanding and I felt myself continuing to grow right along side them.

My experiences with my father led to two resolutions. One: my children would never see me hesitate to say, "I love you." They heard it repeatedly and faithfully. Two: I was there for every game, every event, win or lose, good or bad, and I vowed they would never feel that my love or attention was conditional upon them doing well or meeting my expectations.

But the lessons of love are not so simple that we can make resolutions like those, follow them, and everything work out perfectly. It is difficult to watch your children suffer the losses and heartaches that come with life—perhaps a clue to my father's absence at my basketball games—I took losses very hard. Even without having expectations, I found that my hopes and dreams came suspiciously close to expectations, and just as much of a burden.

Separation from my first wife, and our eventual divorce, led me to re-examine my relationship with my father. A marriage and family therapist suggested that I ask my brother and two sisters what my father was like. This was important for several reasons. My brother and sisters were much older—the closest in age to me, my sister Pat, was 13 years older—so they were more like uncles and aunts than siblings. Since my father died when I was 20, he never saw me experience my children, and I was not able to share the glimpse I had of his interior life. We never had the many important conversations that are possible between a parent and an adult daughter or son. But there was a more important reason the therapist suggested I ask about my father. She knew that I was probably like my father in some very important ways and she was trying to start me on the journey of finding out about the absent man with whom I had such an ambivalent relationship.

Well, some funny things happened. There was an incredible body of evidence surrounding me that suddenly came to light. Of course, my father modeled some inappropriate behavior, and I picked it up, like the way I would distance myself in relationships. It was easy to see the things I wanted to blame on him, but there were also some interesting surprises. I started to remember the people that my father would not let pay rent on property he owned because they were out of work, and when they were back on their feet, he told them to forget about it, he did

not know how much they owed because the bookkeeper lost the records. There must have been hundreds of times I saw him at home at night, meticulously going over the finances of his business, but I didn't realize until I was 46 that he was the bookkeeper. I learned more about the time, before I was born, when my mother and father took care of my Aunt Maisy's children: three boys. My Aunt Maisy died during the birth of her last son. My Uncle Joe, Maisy's husband, moved to Florida when he retired and worked twenty hours a week for my father, and refused to take any pay. He had an intense loyalty to my father that was matched by his three sons, the cousins my mother and father took into their home. He had a stronger connection to my mother and father than his own family. My mother and father were also the primary care-givers to both sets of grandparents in their old age and failing health.

Boy, did I have a lot to learn about the human being my father was, and the love that was in his heart!

Recently I went to Florida to see my first grandchild, Jacob, born this past January 16th, to my oldest daughter Robin and her husband Ben. In just a few days, I had many special moments, but one in particular I will never forget. I was holding Jacob and I saw Robin watching me and I felt so content in those few moments. She took out her camera and took a picture of me holding Jacob, and the picture was similar to one in her photo album of me holding her as a baby. I knew in that moment that she was watching me hold Jacob, because, as a new mother, she knew she was looking at how I held her. It was a moment of grace I wish for every parent.

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I chose the readings from Exodus, the Gospel of John, and Emmanuel Swedenborg's Divine Providence, because they help elucidate for me, and I hope for you, my story.

One of the interesting things about Jesus, to me, is that when he spoke, he often gave a lesson or told a story based on his understanding of the subtext present in Hebrew scripture. To give an example: During the time of the Patriarchs, the first-born son usually inherited the role of family leader upon the death of the father. That was the plan, and was understood by just about everyone, except that Isaac succeeded Abraham because Sarah ran off Hagar and her son Ishmael, who was Abrahams first born son. Jacob, Isaac's youngest son, steals his father's

blessing from Esau, his older brother. Joseph, Jacob's eleventh son, sold into slavery by his brothers, rises to power in Egypt and later helps save his family during a famine. Is it any wonder that Jesus would say, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." It is not just a principle of heaven; it plays out every day in the world around us.

When Jesus was asked to give the greatest commandment, he replied, "Love God, with all your heart and mind, and the second commandment is like unto it, love your neighbor as yourself," and then he added an incredible statement, one that contains the potential to alter the understanding of law for all time "On these two commandments hang all the laws and all the prophets." Every other law, every other prophetic word, depends on these two commandments. I mention this because it relates to the first reading today from Exodus.

God tells Moses, "I am that I am." The Hebrew can also be translated, "I will be what I will be." At some point in my life, very early, I would say, I developed an idea of how I wanted to be loved, and I just did not get that version from my father. But, the truth is, I was loved. God, as love and as truth in our lives, is going to take whatever form necessary for us to learn and grow in appreciation for our life in this world. "I will be what I will be." Essential to loving God is understanding that we have to love God, love truth, in what ever ways God comes to us.

Many things I believed about my father turned out to be mistaken. The biggest oversight, something that had to unfold over time, was that I had to learn the truth about the way my father embodied his love. If I had stopped at any point of my life story and said, this is what love is about, my understanding would have been incomplete. Each step along the way revealed something new, something that deepened my experience of love, like the births of my children. In turn, each experience of love was transforming. Understanding these things required me to see the truth of each situation, so I think it is important to acknowledge that the truth was transformative, and transformed, as well. Love and truth act in synergistic ways throughout our lives.

Jesus also said, "The truth will set you free." From what? For a long time I was bound by what I believed to be true about my father. An important part of the cycle of my life was the birth of my children, connecting with that inner experience of love, but equally important was entering

into the next cycle, the birth of my grandson, Jacob. In spite of the hurt, or wounding, I experienced with my father, I had to learn that the essence of love he embodied connected with, and was the same, as the love I feel inside for my children and my grandchild. Each step of the way the truth was setting me free from what I previously believed to be true.

From *Divine Providence*, by Emanuel Swedenborg:

"It may seem as though others either love us or do not love us, that they are either wise or not, but we see this on the basis of the love or wisdom that is within ourselves."