

Fathers: Finding Perspective

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The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Exodus 20:12

Matthew 5:48; 6:9; 6:26; 8:21-22; 10:37; 23:9

Luke 2:48-49; 3:8

John 6:42; 8:27

Mark 9:23-29

Fathers are a difficult group to talk about, perhaps because I am a man and a father of three grown daughters, and I am sure that I have as much or more difficulty looking at myself as anyone has looking at their own life. Fatherhood and manhood still contain many mysteries for me. Honoring someone is also difficult because the way we choose to honor a person often has something to do with how they view honor. We can honor our fathers by recognizing them, and thanking them, but as a father I know there is another way my children can honor me that I value the most. So, I'm going to start out in one direction with my thoughts today, to provide some context, and then come back to a different perspective on how we can honor our fathers.

I would like to preface my remarks by making sure I state clearly the context I am going to be speaking from. I give complete honor to motherhood, to women, to feminine aspects of the Divine and the co-equal role of women, but today I am not talking, nor am I going to talk, about mothers or women.

I want to focus on a view of fathers that takes into account our relationship with our fathers, the role of fathers, and the spiritual importance of fatherhood.

Some of us have had and are fortunate to have loving fathers; some of us, unfortunately, have had fathers that have been unloving, or even cruel. How do we get perspective?

When we are born our fathers are massively strong and physically tower over us. Later in life the psychological presence of our fathers can still overwhelm us in both positive and negative ways. What a difficult moment it is for a child when they know their father has lied to them, and how difficult it is for the father of a middle-school child who despises every effort he makes to connect and help without explanation. Throughout this process, as a parent, we go through the experience and then learn the lesson, perhaps never to have the opportunity again to live the wisdom we have gained. We grow up as parents in parallel with the growth of our children, suffering similar uncertainty and challenge. Perhaps we think, “I’ll know better with the next child,” but the next child is different and so are all the issues. You are tested in new ways. Then we are tempted to find someone and tell them what we have learned, but, you know what? I am not aware that at any time in my life I have been able to transfer or give my perspective to someone that I thought needed it. The long explanations of fatherly advice I gave my daughters on topics I thought were of special importance—well—they have told me more than once they don’t remember hardly any of them, and on many occasions, when I slipped into a pattern of preaching they recognized, they lovingly told me later, they stopped listening, or simply focused on politely enduring the lecture. Ouch!

They have said, however, that they remember many, many things that I did, so it is clear to me that the most important aspects of our influence come from our actions, not our words. I realize, that here with each of you, day in and day out, if I get up in front of

you and speak, that if I do not live and practice what I talk about, it won't be very long before my words will sound empty. In spiritual matters, the way we live our lives always has more influence, and I believe it is through our experience of living according to the wisdom we know that we gain perspective.

The following story also says something about perspective. You know the adage, "Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes." I recently heard someone say, "It's good advice, you'll be a mile away where they can't hear you, and you have their shoes!" This story is a variation on that theme.

The story is rather simple: "A father has one of those arguments with his fifteen year old son that escalates, and no matter how hard he tries to reach a place of understanding it ends with the father and son not only going their own way, but building a bridge over the gulf between them seems impossible. That evening, unable to sleep, the husband tells his wife he's going for a drive. Sixteen hours later the husband returns home to his wife, who asks, "Where did you go?" The husband says, "To see my father." The wife is a little puzzled, "But your father lives eight hours away, you must have just turned around and come back. Did you talk to him?" The husband, ever forthcoming with the details of his emotional life, answers, "yes." The undeterred wife, "Well, what advice did he give you?" The husband says, "He didn't give me any advice." "Well, what happened?" The husband said very quietly, "I apologized."

What I like about this story is that we do not hear anything about what happens later between the father and son, but there is hope implied in the father's change; the simple act of apology carries so much.

In addition, the story illustrates another enigma: in the one word answers of some men there can be huge currents of emotion about a relationship, and under a stoic surface of individualism that looks heroically independent, there is something tragic. And even though, when we look closely, we can sense grief and sadness, look at the portrayal of fathers and men in our culture: Archie Bunker from *All in the Family*; Ed from *Married with Children*; Tim, the father from *Home Improvement*. These men lack understanding or visible signs of intelligence; they are emotionally unavailable to their wives and children. When confronted with life's issues they either hide or create some kind of scheme that ends up both comic and tragic in its transparency and failure. The comic situations are created in such a way that causes us to feel sorry for them without real empathy for what is actually at stake. In rare moments of intimacy the only one who relates to the father is the understanding mother who forgives his ineptitude and overlooks his confusion about matters of love.

Today we read from the Ten Commandments: "Honor thy mother and father."

One of the most important reasons we need this commandment, a commandment that is stated positively, is that the way we see men and value them, needs to change. I'm not suggesting we gloss over the difficulties of men. One of the things about clichés, and caricatures, is that they often contain truth, but it is important to remember they seldom, if ever, contain the whole truth.

I am not interested in assigning blame to men, to society, to social evil, or institutional evil, or anything like that, but I do want to highlight several issues by looking at the life of Jesus.

The following reading is from a book called *Ego and Archetype* by Edward Edinger, a Jungian psychotherapist:

“Jesus was probably an illegitimate child. Certainly he demonstrates some characteristic features of the individual who has had no personal father. When the personal father is missing and, more particularly, when he is completely unknown, as may happen with an illegitimate child, there is no layer of personal experience to mediate between the ego and the numinous image of the archetypal father. A kind of hole is left in the psyche through which emerge the powerful archetypal contents of the collective unconscious. Such a condition is a serious danger (p. 132).”

The problem Edinger describes, I believe, goes beyond the personal. Culturally we are not effective in expressing positive male models, we are not taking young boys and showing them the value of being a man nor are we giving them support in exploring what it means to be a man, what it means to be around men who are alive spiritually and emotionally as well as physically and intellectually. Young men need to learn to understand and direct their passion, their anger, their fears, the powerful contents of their unconscious, and one of the best ways to mediate these forces is through the active participation of adult men. Our lack of attention to this has a serious consequence. Boys in our culture are falling seriously behind girls in education and other measures of life skills. Some colleges are having trouble maintaining a balanced social environment because the ratio of qualified girl applicants to qualified boy applicants is almost 2:1. These men are the husbands and fathers of future generations.

Every child suffers wounds, some wounds much worse than others, but somehow we have to learn how to help boys turn their wounds into strength without creating distance and emotional detachment. Young men need to learn how to be engaged in work that teaches them how to truly help others in emotional need and express their own emotional needs. I would like to suggest, and I do believe, that a fully realized, whole

male, is able to completely love his wife, properly love and respect his children, is emotionally engaged, is present and responsive in his relationships. He is tender, vulnerable, he is able and willing to cry, he is passionate, and most important, he can learn these things from men. He can do this without compromising his strength or ability to fulfill his purpose as a man.

While I can appreciate Edinger's correct concern for what happens to the individual with an absent or missing personal father, I do not agree with his assessment that Jesus did not have a personal father. In my mind, Jesus exemplifies in his life and his use of the archetypal image of the father, an understanding of what wholeness means, and he demonstrates this wholeness in the way he lived his life. The scripture readings from today illustrate some widely divergent aspects of fathers and fatherhood: from loving kindness, to healing, to a wholeness and independence that are quite different from the "heroically independent and tragic" that I mentioned earlier. Where did Jesus get these images? I think from the very human, very kind, and unselfish man who almost disappears after the birth story: Joseph. I imagine that Joseph disappears from view for a special reason. I guess some historians speculate that he may have died before Jesus began his ministry. But, if he was alive, what an amazing moment for a father and child when the father steps away, and in spite of what he knows about life, he realizes his child has to learn on their own, and the child knows they have to go forward on their own, but they do so cloaked in the unconditional love of a compassionate, forgiving parent that will never abandon them spiritually. If you read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, paying close attention to every use of the word "father" by Jesus, you will begin to see what the wholeness of being a father is about, what a father's love is like, and then, this is very

important, Jesus will take you to a point on new, higher, more sacred ground, where his ultimate act of honoring his mother and father is to live according to a higher truth, a truth revealed, discovered, and finally lived in spite of the consequences. And as the complete story of Jesus reveals, it is a place of transformation like no other.

I invite you to read and decide. Did Jesus develop his ideas about his heavenly father because he did not have a personal father? In other words, did he abstractly construct this ideal heavenly father without the experience of a loving human father? Or, did he learn about his heavenly father from a selfless, humble man that never stopped caring, one who always cared for Jesus in a way that allowed him to grow into the strength and beauty of a life filled with purpose and meaning? If he came to earth to be like us, to overcome suffering, temptation, and death, I think it is immensely meaningful that part of the development of his understanding of God comes from the relationship he had with his earthly father.

Perspective is learned from experience. We can have guides, we can be given wisdom, but ultimately we have to put to use and live the wisdom and experience of those that go before us, like Jesus. In him, in his story, we have perspective and wisdom about fatherhood and about Sonship; about parenthood and the personal growth that leads to living a life dedicated to love and everything it means to love. How do we stand in relationship to our father? our mother? our children? our neighbors? Ultimately it is how we stand in relationship to God. How do we honor our fathers, and our mothers? By seeking our purpose and living a life of purpose with love and compassion.

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As Jesus said in the last reading from Mark, some things are best approached through prayer. There is a blank paper included in with the text of today's service in your bulletin. I invite you to take a couple of minutes to write a simple prayer, two or three sentences, for your father. If your relationship with your father needs healing, now is a good time to ask for healing. If you want give thanks, write a prayer of thanks. I invite you to write any kind of prayer that helps you find a perspective that includes the love and compassion of our heavenly Father in your relationship with your earthly father.

And when you are done, keep the prayer you have written and look at it several times over the next week. Use it, add to it, and hopefully this prayer will enrich all of your relationships.