



**“Not Forgetting Fathers”**

**June 15, 2008**

**The Rev. Stephen Atkinson  
North Shore Unitarian Church  
West Vancouver, BC**

[Note: This sermon when read contained a number of entire poems. To protect copyright, in this on-line version links to the poems are included but not the texts themselves.]

Quotations from the lyrics of two of the six hymns in our Hymn Book grouped under the category: Parenting. #181 – “Just as the goodly mother will protect her children... .” #191 – “[M]y mother’s voice gave meaning to the stars.” There are four other hymns that mention either ‘parents’ or both mothers and fathers, but none refers only to fathers. I doubt we Unitarians would tolerate mentioning *only* the male parent, but we apparently aren’t if we mention only the mother. Why is that so, I wonder.

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One scene from the lovely, funny film *Parenthood*: Steve Martin is a father putting his daughter to bed after a birthday party. “I feel sick,” says the girl. “Aw. Do you wanna throw up?” asks the naive dad. “OK,” says the girl, and promptly projectile vomits all over his pants and shoes. Diane Wiest, playing the mother, calls into the room, “Well, clean it up. Why are you just standing there?” Steve Martin says, “I’m waiting for her head to spin around.” Fatherhood is full of surprises.

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This from the poet Michael Simms; it’s subtitled “for Lea”, L. E. A., which I assume is his daughter: “The Summer You Learned to Swim”

<http://blog.myspace.com/ablindsquirrel>

The poet says to be a father is to learn to be at peace; to work at *not* doing what is too easy to do, like giving advice or responding with anger. A father learns patience. A father waits as a calm and accepting presence for his child to

learn to know *how* to do what can't really be taught, but must be the result of experience and effort and repetition. The father learns from the child who strengthens him.

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Listen to what happens when a word refers only to one gender of parent.

Motherhood	Fatherhood
Mothering	Fathering
Motherless	Fatherless

Do you hear what I hear in these pairs of words? Motherhood is a common term; a national motto; a battle cry; it's delicious food, all sweet and warm. Fatherhood is heard less often; it's a tad formal and conceptual, and hints of conservatism. Mothering implies an ongoing state of relationship, caring and constancy. Fathering *can* imply simply seed-sowing, casualness and infidelity. If you're not sure of this one, listen to it this way: "He mothered five children. He fathered five children." To be motherless is to live in a forlorn state; it cries out for empathy, while to be to be fatherless is to be at risk of being rejected and relegated to the outside; it smacks of blame and judgment. This is simply our *language* speaking as it has done for generations.

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Another poem, this one from Li-Young Lee, called "A Story."

<http://www.indiana.edu/~primate/lee.html>

Fathers, as men often are, can be hobbled by the general male preference for action and demonstration over words. Meaning is emanated rather than expressed, yet many children need the affirmation of words.

In my family, I came out to my father first because he could not figure out why I would stay in Halifax after the first year of medical school, paying rent and looking for a job, when I could come home, work for him and save the money. I told him I needed to stay because I was in therapy; I was gay and didn't want to be. He sat silent for a few moments and then asked if I needed money, which I didn't. Then he told me not to tell my mother, which I didn't – not for three more years anyway. And that's the last we said about it for a long time, but when he and Mom drove me back to Halifax, we stopped in a restaurant for lunch. After we ordered, my father asked me immediately if I knew the waiter. There was an edge in his voice that was unfamiliar. I didn't know the fellow and hadn't picked up on any nuance at all, but I understood that Dad was willing to protect me. He was ready to punch this guy out if he had an eye for me. But Dad never *said* anything. It took me many years to really

understand and accept that he had feelings that he didn't express. He must at times have longed to say to his sons things for which he had no words. Being a father is such hard work.

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And speaking of work, there is this from Virgil Suarez: "No Work Poem #1"

[http://www.mikedaisey.com/2005/08/blog-post\\_17.shtml](http://www.mikedaisey.com/2005/08/blog-post_17.shtml)

Though there are men who work at home or keep house and mothers who are out in the wider world, for most fathers there is a work world, a separate, distinct and even foreign world, untranslatable into domestic language: a world of wood or numbers or machines or tools or engines or words. Like Suarez's father's, a world of camaraderie and usefulness, a world in which best and worst and average are somehow quantifiable, and where success or failure are real and fateful. That gives a father four possibilities: he is happy both at home and work, or at one or the other but not both, or he is unhappy all around and then there is trouble: trouble either for him or others or everyone; the trouble of booze or women or anger or what is worst, despair. For where there is despair there is the risk of violence, of unspeakable acts and then a father becomes a demon; he drops out of humanity altogether never to be allowed back in, or to allow himself to return. The hope of his ever being understood or comforted may be lost, and all there is left is forgiveness, the redemption of forgiveness.

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"Forgiving Our Fathers" by Dick Lourie.

[http://www.class.uidaho.edu/cae\\_core/Links/Lourie%20poem.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/cae_core/Links/Lourie%20poem.htm)

It's true that to forgive is to risk losing self, losing face or identity, if anger, hurt or victimization has wormed its way into our sense of who we are at root. But every father needs to be forgiven, just as every one of us must be. And every one of us needs to forgive, just as our fathers need also to forgive us for none of us is someone else's ideal child or parent – at least not at every moment; we are just who we are and what we choose to do.

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Gregory Peck in the film of one of the most beloved books of our time, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, plays Atticus Finch, the wisest of all fathers in literature, perhaps. There's a scene in which a rabid dog is spotted at the end of the street; the sheriff is called but when he gets there he hands his gun to Atticus to be sure the dog is shot from a far distance before he starts running mad and hurting anybody. Atticus resists but is persuaded; he takes the gun shyly; aims carefully; puts his glasses up on his forehead; aims again; the glasses fall down; he puts

them up again and they fall down again, so he throws them down on the ground, takes final aim and cleanly shoots the dog safely dead. His son, Jem, just stares at him. "Atticus?" he says. "What?" says Atticus. The boy looks down the road at the dog and then just shrugs. "What's the matter, boy?" says the sheriff. "Don't you know your daddy's the best shot in this county?" Atticus hushes him, and he and the sheriff drive back to town.

Jem has finally found something that his father is best at that Jem can brag about to other boys; something they will understand and be in awe of about Atticus, who until now has only been a man in a suit doing mysterious things in the courthouse. But the story doesn't go there because Atticus has once again taught his children something profound. He doesn't want to be bragged about; he has kept this manly skill hidden and somehow his children understand this. Sometimes a father's greatest lesson is to be humble about his greatness.

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Our ending this morning is, of course, with death but not with finality. May we adopt a bit of Armenian culture as Diana Der-Hovanessian describes it in "Shifting the Sun."

<http://groong.usc.edu/tlg/tlg-20060128.html> .

Shalom. Blessed Be. Amen.