

**Fathering<sup>1</sup>**  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*Fathers Day, June 19, 2016*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Reading:* From “*Fathers, Sons, and Loss: What We Can Learn*” by Neil Chethik<sup>2</sup>  
They were my father’s most memorable words to me. They didn’t come in early childhood or adolescence or even in my college years. Rather, they came as I stood frozen at the door of full adulthood, on the occasion of the death of my paternal grandfather. ...[My father and I were at my grandfather’s house,] sorting the material remnants of the old man’s life. ...Working in different rooms, we’d occasionally exclaim to each other about a special find. Mostly, however, we sorted in silence.

We kept at it until the afternoon waned. Then [we] collapsed in my grandfather’s heavily pillowed living room chairs, glasses of the old man’s scotch in hand. We shared memories for a while, then quiet. Finally, as the room faded into darkness, I heard a groan. It startled me at first, for I had never before heard my father cry.

I rose and knelt by his side. After a couple of minutes, he spoke. “I am crying not only for my father but for me,” he said. “His death means I’ll never hear the words I’ve always wanted to hear from him: that he was proud of me, proud of the family I’d raised and the life I’ve lived.”

And then he uttered the words that continue to resound, all these years later. “So that you never have to feel this way, too,” he said, “I want to tell you how proud I am of you, of the choices you’ve made, of the life you’ve created.”

Much of the pain inherent in father-son relationships dissolved for me when I received that blessing. And in the months that followed, I felt stronger, more confident, especially as I started my career again. I felt as if my father represented not only himself but the larger world, and I had been accepted into it.

*Sermon*

It must be a hard month to be a father in America. First of all, two weeks ago, we saw the media reports about a letter written by the father of the Stanford student convicted of assaulting an unconscious woman. This was the case in which the privileged white student received only 6 months in jail at his sentencing. His father had tried to excuse the actions of his son as “only 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life.” Neither father nor son acknowledged any responsibility for the actions that were so devastating to a young woman. I know that the case has also been a painful re-opening of wounds for many many women who have experienced this devastation in their own lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Chethik is a member of the UU Church of Lexington, KY. Excerpt from *UU World*, Vol XV #1, Jan/Feb 2001, p. 17-18.

Then, last weekend, we witnessed the horrific shooting at Pulse, an Orlando GLBT nightclub, that resulted in the deaths of 49 people and the wounding of 50 more. Once again, a father appeared in the media, and while he said he was saddened by his son's actions during the holy month of Ramadan, and would have stopped his son if he had known, other videos have surfaced that are more complicated. In one he talks about how God would punish those involved in homosexuality, so humans should have nothing to do with it. In other videos he has proclaimed support for the Taliban, and that he is the leader of the Afghan Provisional Government in exile. In fact, the more we learn about him, the more strange he appears. One source thinks perhaps he might be delusional.

So just as we are about to celebrate Father's Day, these very creepy father figures are in the public eye, and that must be hard to watch, as a father. But the biggest reason I think it must be hard to be a father in America right now is because fathers want to keep their children safe. And our world feel very unsafe right now. One father of one of the victims in Orlando spoke about wishing he had better taught his son how to use a gun—as if that might have protected him once the shooting began in the nightclub. Even though we know that there was a guard who did have a gun and tried to shoot the killer without being able to stop him.

When we think about the roles that have been assigned to fathers, one is to protect children from harm and danger. So it must feel doubly hard to witness all the ways that our world is unsafe—unsafe for girls and women, unsafe for GLBTQ persons, unsafe for black and brown teenagers, unsafe for Muslims in America, and unsafe as well for all young men seeking to find their own way into an honorable adult manhood.

How can we make the world safe for our children? We have one model—a blustery macho posturing with bigger guns and bigger weapons. There are plenty of proponents of that kind of father protection from danger. And then perhaps we can celebrate another sort of model—that of Senator Chris Murphy and other senators filibustering for 14 hours for some sort of progress on better gun control. Though it doesn't of course go far enough.

And then I remembered another model of fathering in the midst of harm and danger. I think of the poignant writing of Ta-Nehisi Coates that came out last summer, *Between the World and Me*, in the form of a letter to his fifteen year old son. He doesn't offer safety to his son. He lays out—with all the pain it must cost him to acknowledge it—the truth that America has never been safe for a black child, and is not safe now. Yet in his very vulnerability, I see a kind of fathering love that creates a powerful space of caring and connection in the midst of danger.

Fathering. When I was a child, my father was like God to me. My father knew everything. He could fix things and build things. He was the authority in our house. He defined reality and how the world was. At bedtime, he prayed with us and blessed the house, and we did feel safe and protected. I remember one time having a dream in which he was somehow sick and weak, and it scared me to see him that way.

Now my father is sick and weak. He has suffered two strokes and the beginnings of dementia, and is staying in a nursing facility near his home in West Virginia, hoping that he will recover enough to go home again. Our family hopes so too. But any recovery is only a small upslope in a longer trajectory of decline. His children are trying to take care of him, trying to offer him some safety in a world that has started to come undone.

There were times in my life when I was trying to sort through and process the gifts and the wounds that I had received from my father. We all receive gifts and wounds from our fathers. Even the best fathers in the world disappoint their children sometimes. I know that some wounds are deeper than others. I have listened to those whose hearts were broken by their fathers' neglect or abuse, or by the absence of good fathering in their lives.

When Father's Day comes along, while it may be a joyful day for some, it can bring up the pain others carry from difficult relationships with their fathers. It can trigger anger and resentment for fathering betrayals. It can also trigger grief and sadness for those who have lost their fathers or for fathers who are in some way estranged from their children. And so I invite us to honor whatever father feelings we carry in our hearts today.

It is not an easy thing to be a father in our world today. Perhaps I have greater compassion than when I was younger for the challenges that faced my father, and that face men who are now trying to father their children. Our expectations of fathers have changed drastically in the last fifty years. Our society has never been more divided about fathering. Researchers and pundits argue about its failings and its remedies. Conservatives push for a return to more traditional male/female roles, and liberals wonder about whether there is any difference between mothering and fathering.

In my parents' time, the roles of mother and father were fairly distinct and well-defined. When she could afford to, the mother was expected to stay home with the kids, feed them, bathe them, dress them, and love them in an intimate and gentle way. The father's role was to be a good provider and to be a source of authority and discipline. He was the connection to the outside world. He was also an occasional playmate and coach, for roughhousing and risk taking. Stereotypically, my mother was our emotional resource, and my father was the intellectual.

However, even among my generation, I know people whose families didn't fit this model—families where dad was the lovable caregiver, and mom, the strict disciplinarian. The same feminists who are sometimes blamed for disrupting families, also helped to cultivate a new style of parenting, one in which both men and women are active in the everyday care and nurture of offspring. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for fathers to be up for the 4 a.m. feeding, not uncommon for them to be changing diapers, and bathing and dressing the little ones. Today's dads have the opportunity for a closer engagement with their kids.

But does that mean there is no distinction any longer between mothering and fathering? Or is there a whole new model for what fathering is all about? Several years ago, when the *UU World* magazine assembled a trio of experts on parenting, they couldn't agree on what fathering was

supposed to include. But I have been thinking about some of the things that all children need from their parents that traditionally might be called *mothering* or *fathering*. I would suggest that those needs might be met by loving parents of either gender, and also by adults who aren't family members. By identifying what children need from their parents, we also have clues for how to go about healing from the wounds we may have suffered if our parents were unable to give us those gifts.

What do children need? At a basic level, they need shelter, food and clothing. They need a provider. Part of *fathering* has been to provide for the physical needs of children. Sometimes we haven't appreciated that role as much as we should, as we have focused more on the emotional aspects of parenting. Parents of either sex can be providers. And all adults can help in making society more attentive to the physical needs of children. Millions of children don't have access to adequate shelter, food and clothing. When we lobby for a livable minimum wage or for affordable housing, we could say we are fathering the world.

Another part of fathering has been to help children learn how to provide for themselves in adulthood. Most people don't take on the trade of their fathers anymore, like some did in the past, but we still need help in navigating the world of work and career. Perhaps some of us did not receive this kind of fathering. To heal that wound, we might find mentors to help us gain work skills, and learn how to succeed in a career or business. Those who have been successful in the world can offer their expertise to others who need those skills. That is another way of fathering the world.

What do children need? They need someone to cook their meals, and make lunches, and dress them in the morning, and tuck them in at night. We have called this hands-on part of the work *mothering*. But this too can be done by adults of all genders. One of the things I tell people who are going through a hard time is to pay special attention to such basic self-care—cook a good meal, take a hot bath, wear your favorite shirt. Instinctively, we feel better when we are nurturing ourselves in these fundamental ways—we are mothering ourselves. And this is part of why it makes such a difference when we personally serve food at the Preble Street Soup Kitchen or at a reception following a memorial service. To be given food is so basic to our well-being.

Children need to feel valuable, to feel they are loved unconditionally. For some reason, this is usually called *mothering*, but children need to feel loved by everyone who is close to them, whether father or mother, or other close caregiver. Children need a sense that they are special—that their parents are delighted to welcome them into the world. What might our lives be like if we heard these phrases every day? “I'm so glad you were born. You're a treasure to me. I love you just the way you are.” If our parents didn't say these things to us as children, we can say them to each other and to ourselves as adults.

Children also need to be seen and appreciated for their unique skills and accomplishments. They need to feel someone is proud of them, and has confidence that they will succeed. Good *fathering* has traditionally included this validation. As Neil Chethik remarked in our reading, what his dad missed most was his own father being proud of him. When Neil's dad said that he

was proud of Neil, Neil felt as if the larger world accepted him, too. In our society, fathers have most often represented the wider world, but mothers are also playing that role as women are achieving more power in the public sphere. So we can father each other and ourselves each time we say, “I believe in you,” or “You can do it! I am proud of you.”

My mentor during my ministry internship was like that for me. The Rev. Victor Carpenter was the same age as my natural father. I worked with him for a year in the First Church of Belmont, before I was ordained. He was warm hearted, spontaneous, a really good minister, and he thought I could do anything! He praised my sermons, and talked to me about all aspects of ministry. He shared what he did at weddings and funerals, and that gave me a place to start to figure out what I wanted to do. He helped me to feel confident, so I could risk stepping into this unknown calling. This was the power created by his having faith in me. When we offer that to each other, we are fathering the world.

Children also need limit-setting and guidance. They need help in learning to balance their own desires with respecting the needs of others. When we set limits for them, we are *fathering* our children. In some families these days, neither parent wants to be the limit-setter. Do you remember the show on TV called “Nanny 911?” The English nanny came in to help parents whose children were out-of-control. One of their main points was that parents need to become a team around limit-setting. Many of us carry wounds from poorly done limit-setting when we were children—perhaps we were shamed into submission, or abused, or the discipline we received was linked to anger or withdrawal of affection. We find it challenging then to set limits as adults and to negotiate conflict. We can father ourselves by choosing to study conflict resolution or nonviolent communication or mediation skills.

And yes, children need safety. Children need to feel they can be themselves and explore the world and test their limits, and take risks, without dangerous consequences. We *father* the world when we help to create a community and a planet that is safer for all children; when we acknowledge the dangers that exist, and do our part to search for alternatives.

All of us who love children can help to father them: we can be proud of them, encourage their exploits, and celebrate their successes. We can take them on adventures, and keep them safe, so they learn to feel confident to take risks and be curious. We can teach them skills, help them learn from mistakes, and encourage their respect for other people. These are just a few of the roles that we have traditionally attached to *fathering*.

All of us, too, as adults, can learn to father ourselves and each other, to share the gifts we received from our fathers and to heal from the wounds of our childhoods. We can adopt father figures to help us learn what we didn’t learn from our own parents. Father figures are those who believe in us, who treat us like we’re special, who teach us the tricks of the trade. It might be as simple as a neighbor who teaches us how to wash and wax the car. It might be an art teacher who encourages us to draw or paint, or a friend who listens to our struggles and confusion.

When I was a child, my father was God to me. Part of growing up is realizing that our fathers are not God. They are human beings with gifts and failings. Part of growing up is letting go of needing our fathers to be better than they were. This is easier to do if we realize that we can offer and receive fathering from others. When we can do this, we are also better able to honor the gifts and forgive the wounds we have received from our fathers.

The idea of Father's Day first came from Sonora Dodd, in 1909, while she was listening to a Mother's Day sermon. She wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart. Smart was widowed when his wife died while giving birth to their sixth child. He was left to raise the newborn and his other five children by himself on a rural farm in eastern Washington State. After Sonora became an adult she realized the blessing of her father's single parenting. I think it is a great thing that Father's Day began in honor of a single dad who was both mothering and fathering his children. It reminds us that families of all kinds can be just right.

So in this imperfect world, during a month of much danger and distress, may we find a way to honor all the feelings in our hearts about our own fathers, and about the fathering we may do. And may we commit ourselves anew to create a safer world for all of our children.

### *Meditation*

Our final hymn was written in response to the 1978 murder of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay city supervisor in San Francisco. Though our hymnal uses the first line, "We Are a Gentle, Angry People," its actual title is "Singing for Our Lives."<sup>3</sup> # 170

### CLOSING WORDS

I invite each of you as you leave today to take a flower from the vase.  
When we take a flower, Norbert Capek reminds us,  
we don't make any distinction  
about where it came from or whom it represents.  
We accept each of us as brothers and sisters,  
acknowledging everyone who seeks goodness as our friend.  
Each one of the flowers is different. Each one of us is different.  
Each flower is beautiful. Each one of us is beautiful.  
We are one garden. One human race.  
May we always look for the ever changing beauty in each other faces.  
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,  
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.  
Blessed be!

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<sup>3</sup> Words and music by Holly Near. #170 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (UUA, 1993)