

“Finding Dad”

UUCGV Sermon by
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Parenting is tough; probably one of the toughest things any of us ever do. But most of us do it and all of us have been shaped by it generation by generation, in all lands, across time. Fathers, mothers and children –the core family. Vehicle of transmission for life values and ways. Crucible of transformation changing fathers into Dads, mothers into Moms and children into adults capable of being even better Dads and Moms. And thereby, family by family, building better communities. Or not, as the tragedies and sorrows of injustice and violence play out around us in our homes and communities.

A story as old as time but never more relevant than today. Everything we talk about, sing about, meditate about, hope for in this sacred space in one way or another leads us back to family: what it was, is, can be. I think David Brooks, a man I rarely agree with, had it right in a recent op-ed you might have seen:

“We understand that a free society requires individuals who are capable of handling that freedom – people who can be counted on to play their social roles as caring parents, responsible workers and dependable neighbors...We know that this sort of character formation can’t be done just individually. It’s carried out in families, schools and communities. It depends on some common assumptions about what’s right and wrong, admired and not admired – a common moral ecosystem. So we care intensely about the health of that ecosystem and we argue about how to improve it.”

He goes on to say that, “The larger culture itself needs to be revived in four distinct ways: we need to be more communal in an age that’s overly individualistic; we need to be more morally minded in an age that’s overly utilitarian; we need to be more spiritually literate in an age that’s overly materialistic; and we need to be more emotionally intelligent in an age that is overly cognitive.” (New York Times, 7 June 2016). Family values indeed!

So how does this happen in families? Apart from biology, what is the role of fathers/men in shaping children into healthy Men and Women? And how has that changed over time? To begin to address these questions, here are some findings from a recent Pew Research Center report (Pew Research Center, “5 facts about today’s fathers”, 18 June 2015).

- Fewer fathers are their family’s sole breadwinner. 60 percent of married couples with children under 18 live in dual-income households as opposed to 25 percent in 1960.
- Father’s and mother’s roles are converging. In 1965, 70 percent of father’s time was concentrated in paid work usually outside the home. Since that time, for fathers, time spent doing household chores has more than doubled and time spent with children has nearly tripled. For mothers, time spent on paid work has increased to the point where there is a more equal distribution of time spent with children and the household between fathers and mothers.
- Work-family balance is a challenge for many working fathers. 50 percent say that it is difficult for them to balance the responsibilities of job and family, about the same percentage reported by working mothers.

- Today's fathers say they spend at least as much time with their kids as their own fathers spent with them. 46 percent of fathers and 52 percent of mothers say this. But nearly half of these fathers said they spend too little time with their kids.
- More fathers are staying at home to care for kids. 7 percent of fathers do not work outside the home today, roughly 2 million fathers, a substantial increase over the 4 percent in 1989.

A more intimate perspective on these questions comes from my own children who are now adults with partners and children of their own. My daughter is a wife, mom with 4 kids and career as a doula or birth parent guide and advocate, which for her, she tells me, is not so much about childbirth but building healthy families. Recently, she invited a select number of current and former women clients to join a unique women's group to discuss and explore what was happening in their young families, specifically, wife/husband relations and mother/father roles in parenting. Most of what she told me confirmed the Pew Research findings.

But then she told me that for ***all*** of the women in the group, the fathers were distant and not really engaged in the lives of their children, something that had become a major issue in the families. The fact that ***all*** of the women said this surprised her and troubled me as I remembered my own stumbling entry into fatherhood. As the discussions continued, it became more and more apparent that rather than choosing not be engaged, the fathers ***did not know how to*** engage with their children. Then ensued a discussion between my daughter and myself about what fathers and mothers bring to parenting, specifically what Jan and I brought to the task of raising our three children.

It was a difficult, at times painful, journey into not only my past as a father/husband, but that of my father and his father. The sad reality is that it took me a long time, far too long a time, to get beyond being a father—something that all men can do and be—and start to become a dad, something that far fewer of us can do and be. But the kicker goes beyond my experience. Given the massive challenges we face as families, communities, nations, I believe that for us to improve the “moral ecosystem” in the ways outlined by Brooks, the family system must change. And I believe that a crucial part driving that change must be the transformation of fathers into dads.

I am feeling my way here, aware of my failings and not completely sure of where I am going. After all, many of you listening to or reading these words may be far more experienced and wiser in parenting than I. But, perhaps the observations I offer will be useful as navigational markers or cairns on a trail familiar to many and new to some of you. I call the trail “finding dad”.

The first marker is surviving the transformation of wives into moms. The girl I fell in love with, shared everything with, suddenly changed into someone else who had been through something I really didn't understand and was now attached to a tiny new being who, with each breath, sucked up all the affection and attention previously lavished on me. More, that tiny being was not only shockingly loud, but adept at turning our ordered, predictable lives into sheer chaos 24 hours a day. What had been was gone and wasn't coming back. As a new father, fresh from Lamaz classes, I was lost, my theory of happy family shipwrecked on a living reality I did not understand. She bonded with baby. I bonded with the dog.

But she needed me and I needed her as both of us began this wild ride which would last not for 18 years, but for a lifetime. Something else no-one tells you. And besides, the little lady in my arms was cuddly and cute despite the dirty diapers and disruption of my universe. I began to accept the fact that there were three of us now, not counting the dog. But it took a sharp kick in the pants to get me to the next marker.

The second marker is learning to listen. Actually, it was more than that. I needed to learn a foreign language of sounds and partially formed words expressed with high emotion that kept changing. Clearly, I was ill-equipped and emotionally unprepared for this despite years of academic research into foreign cultures, languages and history. I badly needed new tools and knowledge. Luckily, we knew other young couples going through the same thing and formed a sharing group. A good step.

Next, we all read and discussed Thomas Gordon's book PET: Parent Effectiveness Training (still around!) and its key insight: **active listening**, e.g., seeking what this little being was really trying to communicate beyond the rudimentary words she was just learning how to use. Invaluable, a godsend! After way too long, I began to discover the incredible creature and teacher she was turning out to be. By the time her brother arrived, 4 years later, I was hooked; head over heels in love and on the road to becoming a Dad for the first time.

The third marker is surviving the blows of the outside world. Three years after moving our family from Berkeley to Houston, my career as a history professor came to an abrupt end. End of a job. End of a career. End of a dream. Stranded in a city and culture alien to us, excommunicated from what I had loved, I lost it, and in my despair damaged and nearly lost my family as well. Those who have gone through times like that—as so many of our friends and neighbors have these days—will understand. Gone was the Dad my children had come to love, replaced by a haggard stranger with pain in his soul and a far-away look in his eyes. For years, he went through the motions of parenting, but he was far distant, investing all his energies into reinventing himself into something marketable job by job, while his wife, on her meager salary, held the family together. Dad had died.

Looking back on this dark time, I have three thoughts. First, families are incredibly tough, resilient things bound together by a love that is difficult to break. Second, it takes a community to embrace and help a family through these times. Without it, even the toughest families flounder and may fail. Newly arrived, we did not have that community. Third, no-one is immune to the vagaries of the outside world no matter how complacent and confident they are. Life is risk and we would do well to hold onto each other.

The fourth marker is resurrection. As fate would have it, our third child was born in the dark time with a robust, demanding personality which drove his father, already lost, to his wit's end. Years of arguing went by until one day, perhaps in desperation, I began to listen again. To his stories, to his questions, to his fascination with history. This led to story-telling sessions every night—one to two hours long or longer if he begged which he always did—about Knight Aaron engaged in a Medieval journey, village by village populated by characters—good and bad and mixed—that I suggested and he fleshed out in astounding detail. Then it was Knight Aaron who fell into a time warp (we were both trekkies and still are) and found himself emerging from the great Aztec pyramid in ancient Tenochtitlan, thus kicking off another journey with characters richly fleshed out. And other, similar journeys, night after night for over two years. Through the stories and the journeys, I came to know the incredibly passionate and creative person he was for the first time. Somewhere in that process, I rose from the dead and became a Dad again.

The fifth marker is differentiation. Each child defines the kind of Dad you become, which is to say, each process of engagement with your sons or daughters is different and there is no single, definitive way of becoming Dad. And this makes sense. Not only are kids different, but they arrive at different moments in the life of the family and in the lives of fathers and mothers. The dynamics and interactions are complex which makes the whole area of family systems utterly fascinating. An excellent perspective on this is the work of Richard C. Schwartz, [Internal Family Systems Therapy](#) (1995).

So it took time for me to become a Dad to my second child, a son, who was as easy-going and cheery as his younger brother was difficult and feisty. For these reasons, he was overlooked and neglected for far too long, lost in the shadows cast by his more outgoing sister and brother.

This was the son whose birth I still remember as the Dad I had become, for the first time. This was the son who tugged on my hair giggling as I carried him on my back to my office and then slept on a sleeping bag under my desk, oblivious to the students who came and went. This was the son who, in his quiet way, also held the family together as it struggled to rebuild itself after the damage of the dark times. Our rock. He's also the son who listens and observes far more than one suspects, to our chagrin. Because he then replays key episodes of family history with uncanny caricatures of each of us rendered with great humor, a talent that must surely get him into trouble among his firefighter colleagues at the Station House.

This was the son who reminded me of the resurrected Dad I had become for the second time with his own words:

There was a time in my life when I thought about dropping out of college and becoming a career bartender. I was bored with my education, primarily because I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was frustrated and felt trapped in an environment I didn't like. Who hasn't thought about taking the easy way out? Living carelessly day to day, minimal responsibilities, endless parties, and what seemed like decent income. I was 20 years old and I had it all planned out.

Pop was on a business trip not too far away from San Antonio where I went to college. He called me and told me we were going on a trip. I was in, sure, why not. I wasn't worried about being in trouble or getting yelled at. That's not how Pop operates. Deep down I knew I was lost, and I knew I could talk to my folks, needed to talk to my folks.

He pulled up in the rental car, a red Pontiac Grand Am. Without too much fuss, he handed me the keys with the usual precautionary requests, and we were off on our road trip. Along the way, I dumped my thoughts and logic going on in my head. Hell, the last time we knew each other was years ago.

We ended up in Shiner, TX. We checked into the hotel and went to a small restaurant for dinner. We celebrated our spontaneous trip with cold fresh Shiner Bock and a 32 oz. steak cooked to perfection. Yes, I ate an entire 32 oz steak. It was delicious.

I don't even remember much of the conversations we had on that trip. But I finished college.

So different each of them were then and are today, both in themselves and the kind of Dad I became for them. Perhaps our daughter sums it up best in her own words:

I think the joys of parenthood came later for Dad. He was not a large part of my growing up memories, as he traveled often and did not engage in a lot of the scaffolding my Mom was putting up. He was easily irritated by us and seemed more alive on trips with others than he was at home with us. I knew very little about him for a long time.

Besides the challenges of children and parenting, though, I think it was fundamentally hard for him to let go and flow even though he very much wants to. He's aware of the transcendence and fullness of that "in theory"—which is why he reads voraciously and tells a damn good story—bungee jumping into the flow where he's always assured a safe passage back to the predictable. I am all about flow and rapid growth and outside of the lines. So, when there was a problem for me growing up, he was not the one I turned to. Life was too heavy then. We, as children, were too close to vulnerability and too desperate for our own attention. But time went by and we all grew up and life calmed down and things started to

change, dramatically. He became a lot more present and we became a lot less needy. And I know (or think I know) much more about him as a result.

Today, there is nothing he wouldn't do to help out. He can be there now...where he couldn't be then. He's built his own scaffolding for us in the last twenty years –different from Mom's –which is cool. There are limits on our relationship, which will always require some maneuvering around, but time goes by and we all get older and more knowledgeable about the complexities of living this life with others. We know that everyone is caught in a web of their own making and is silently (sometimes not so silently) trying to weave their way out. We know that intentions are usually pure and communication is tricky, even for experts. I know he always has my best interests in mind, keeps an eye out for things he thinks I'd find fascinating to read or attend, lends an ear as I try to get life insurance, my will and finances under control and would probably research moving heaven and earth if I asked it of him.

We are more alike than we are different and I'd like to believe, at the risk of sounding arrogant, that I am often unhooking us both from the bungee cord of theory and into the wilds of flow as I live my life— navigating emotion, surrounding myself with people who see the real me, leading grassroots movements, incorporating my creativity into my parenting and living by my convictions—all of his best and most feared hidden qualities.

There are more markers on the trail but time is short. I would like to leave you with a few closing thoughts:

- Moms are crucial to fathers becoming Dads. They are guides and interpreters, constantly reminding, cajoling, us fathers to become involved, to be engaged with the incredible human beings we have brought into the world. In this, as in so many other things one learns over a lifetime, they are far truer companions and soul mates as moms than the girls we fell in love with.
- Our value as Dads lies not so much in what we say or teach, as what we do and who we are. As the novelist, Umberto Eco, observed: "I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom."
- In these parlous times, there is risk in becoming a father, starting a family. There is far greater risk in engaging, knowing, loving, each child of that family, thereby becoming a Dad. For in those deep connections, there is not only fulfillment but vulnerability to the risk of loss, the risk of pain as that child grows up and enters a world beyond our protection. But life is risk, is it not. Certainties are few in this world and living and loving fully require courage as we journey through it. The good news is that we do it with others, our families. And there are few joys as deep and abiding as becoming a Dad no matter how long it takes.

Happy Father's Day!